

Israel's war on Gaza killed 252 children, report claims

Israeli human rights agency challenges army's figures

By Donald Macintyre in Jerusalem

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The Israeli official figures seriously underestimated the civilian Palestinian death toll exacted during its onslaught in Gaza early this year, according to painstaking research to be published today.

The first detailed casualty figures from an Israeli human rights organisation since the war ended puts the number of children under 16 killed in the offensive at 252 as opposed to the 89 cited by the military. B'Tselem says its fieldworkers gathered death certificates, photos, and testimonies relating to all 252 of the children.

B'Tselem, which said it had carried out "months of meticulous investigation and cross-checks with numerous sources" has, unlike the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), made public the names of all those it said were killed in the war. It said that since the IDF had refused to furnish the agency with its own detailed list, it was impossible to compare the names but that "the blatant discrepancy between the numbers is intolerable."

The new figures came as it emerged that the Israel Defence Forces have opened a criminal investigation into allegations by Khaled Abed Rabbo and his mother Suad that three of his daughters were shot – two fatally – as the family, carrying a white flag, walked from their house in eastern Jabalya on January 7, early in the military's ground offensive.

Mr Abed Rabbo testified – including to The Independent two weeks later – that his mother, who was waving a white headscarf, his wife and the three girls were outside the house when a soldier emerged from a tank and opened fire killing Amal, two, Suad, seven, and severely wounding a third, Samar, four, who was evacuated to Belgium for medical treatment.

The investigation followed a formal complaint by three Palestinian legal rights agencies Adalah, Al Haq, and al Mezan. It is one of several still under way into the conduct of Operation Cast Lead, which the IDF and government ministers have repeatedly insisted was conducted according to international law and ethical principles. Mr Abed Rabbo and his mother were interviewed last week at the Erez crossing into Gaza by military police conducting the investigation, al Mezan said.

B'Tselem's total Palestinian death toll exceeds by more than 200 the 1,166 cited by the IDF after its own survey and closer to, if not quite as high as, the list assembled by Palestinian human rights groups. The IDF insisted when issuing its own figures that 709 or around 60 percent of the dead were " Hamas terror operatives" and that a total of 295 "not involved" Palestinians were killed.

By contrast B'Tselem puts the total figure for those who "did not take part in the hostilities" at 773. One discrepancy is complicated by the fact that the IDF included Hamas police officers, the majority of whom were killed in aerial bombings of police stations at the outset of the offensive, in their list of "terror" operatives, while Palestinian agencies include them as civilians.

B'Tselem lists the dead police officers—of whom it says 248 were killed—as a separate third category. But even if they are included with the 328 whom B'Tselem lists as having been "involved in the hostilities" it comes to 576 –over 100 less than the militants whom the IDF said it killed during the operation.

The agency repeated calls for an "independent and credible investigation" into the military's conduct of the war. While acknowledging that the numbers did not themselves prove "that Israel violated the laws of war", they should be considered along with "numerous testimonies" by IDF soldiers and Palestinians during and after the operation.



GETTY IMAGES

Palestinians sit among the rubble of homes destroyed by Israeli air strikes

These raised "grave concerns that Israel breached fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and caused excessive harm to civilians."

Operation Cast Lead

295 The number of Palestinian civilians Israel estimates were killed in Operation Cast Lead

773 The number of civilians human rights organisation B'Tselem estimates were killed

918 Palestinian Centre for Human Rights' estimate of number of dead civilians – 65 per cent of their estimated total death count, 1,419

1.5m Population living in Gaza's 139 square miles

2,360 Minimum number of air strikes executed by Israel Defence Force

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