

Israel returns wrong body to killed Palestinian teenager's family



Mourners carry the body of Palestinian security man Tayseer Issa, who was killed by Israeli forces according to the health ministry, during his funeral in Jenin in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, June 10, 2021 [File: Mohamad Torokman/Reuters]

Ramallah, November 20 (RHC)-- Israeli soldiers have returned the remains of a Palestinian teenager who was killed in October in the occupied West Bank, only to be told by the family that it was the body of someone else.

The macabre mix-up, which the army called an “unfortunate mistake,” was likely to draw attention to Israel’s policy of holding the remains of Palestinians killed while allegedly carrying out attacks, which human rights groups say amounts to collective punishment of the bereaved families.

Israel had planned to return the bodies of two Palestinians -- Isra Khazimia and Amjad Abu Sultan -- on “humanitarian grounds”. At the time of the alleged attacks, Khazimia was said to have had mental health issues while Abu Sultan was a minor.

But when they handed over the remains of Abu Sultan, his family informed the soldiers that it was the wrong body. The remains have not been publicly identified.

“Upon return of the body, it was revealed that the body was identified incorrectly. This unfortunate mistake is being reviewed by the relevant authorities,” the Israeli army said in a statement. It apologised for the mistake and said the correct remains would be returned to the family on Saturday.

The Palestinian Civil Affairs Committee, which coordinates day-to-day activities with Israel, said it was Abu Sultan’s family who noticed the body was not their son’s. The family could not immediately be reached for comment.

Abu Sultan, 14, was killed on October 14 in the occupied West Bank town of Beit Jala, near Bethlehem. A witness said Israeli soldiers shot Abu Sultan, who was lighting a Molotov cocktail, without any warning or alert.

“Israeli forces routinely unlawfully kill Palestinian children with impunity, using excessive force and unjustified intentional lethal force,” said Ayed Abu Eqtaish, the accountability programme director at Defense for Children International-Palestine, following Abu Sultan’s death.

Israeli police shot and killed Khazimia, a mother of four, in September, when she allegedly tried to stab an officer in Jerusalem’s Old City. Her remains were returned at Salem checkpoint near the northern West Bank city of Jenin.

Local sources said the Israeli army banned Palestinians from gathering near the checkpoint and only allowed Khazimia’s father to be present to receive her body, in addition to an ambulance vehicle operated by just the driver.

Israel says its policy of holding the remains of Palestinian attackers is needed to deter future attacks and for possible exchanges for the remains of two Israeli soldiers held by the Palestinian group Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

According to rights group Jerusalem Legal Aid and Human Rights Center (JLAC), Israel is holding the remains of about 80 Palestinians, in addition to 254 bodies buried in many in the “cemeteries of numbers” – secret cemeteries where their graves are marked by numbered plaques.

JLAC and Adalah Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights say Israel is the only country in the world to practice necroviolence, a policy of confiscating human remains, where it relies on regulations dating back to 1945 (during the British Mandate) as grounds for its policy.

International law considers the practice a violation of human rights. According to the Geneva Conventions, the parties of an armed conflict must bury the deceased in an honourable way, “if possible according to the rites of the religion to which they belonged and that their graves are respected, properly maintained, and marked in such a way that they can always be recognised”.

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