With all eyes on Gaza, Israel quietly ups its brutal aggression in West Bank

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Ramallah, December 1 (RHC)-- Tension hangs in the air in an occupied West Bank village nestled amid rolling hills and olive groves. Out of nowhere, a deafening roar of helicopter blades resonates there, exacerbating tensions. Israeli regime soldiers, clad in olive green fatigues, armed with rifles and wearing protective gear, prepare to carry out their dastardly military raid.

In a matter of seconds, the sleepy village is engulfed in chaos. Tear gas canisters are launched into a crowd of protestors, filling the air with a choking haze that obscures vision.   The sound of gunfire erupts, mingling with the cries of frightened civilians caught in the crossfire.

The flickering flames of burning barricades illuminate the scene. Debris is strewn on the streets of the densely populated neighborhood. The wall of one of the houses has a large bullet hole in it.

Amid the chaos and mayhem, young Palestinian men, with their faces masked by keffiyehs, throw stones and Molotov cocktails at the heavily-armed marauding Israeli regime forces.

Israel's war to "root out" Palestinian resistance movement Hamas in the aftermath of the latter's October 7 Operation Al-Aqsa Storm (also known as Al-Aqsa Flood), which killed 15,000 civilians in the Gaza Strip, is no longer confined to the besieged territory.

While all eyes are on Gaza, the Israeli regime has been tightening its grip on the occupied West Bank, carrying out deadly attacks and raids on residential areas and hospitals.

On Tuesday night, the regime soldiers raided the Ibn Sina Hospital in Jenin and destroyed the road that leads to the hospital, as revealed by multiple videos filmed by locals. Many doctors and patients were injured in the aggression, and many houses were in the vicinity of the hospital. They also blocked the road, preventing patients from going to the hospital.

Violence had already spiraled in the occupied West Bank before the Gaza war. According to the United Nations, 2022 marked the "deadliest" year for the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and East al-Quds since it started recording in 2005.

Israeli forces had killed at least 170 Palestinians in these areas in random, indiscriminate, arbitrary raids. This year is on track to becoming the deadliest year for Palestinians in the occupied West Bank in almost two decades as the number of fatalities has surged dramatically.

At least 371 Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and East al-Quds have been killed this year so far by Israeli regime forces and violent settlers. According to a statement by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), between October 7 and November 27, at least 231 Palestinians, including 59 children, were killed in the occupied West Bank.

Of those killed, 222 were killed by Israeli forces, 8 by Israeli settlers and 1 either by forces or settlers.

"The seven-week toll represents more than half of all Palestinians killed in the West Bank this year. So far, 2023 has been the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since OCHA began recording casualties in 2005," OCHA said in the statement.

According to the organization, more than 67 percent of fatalities since early October have occurred during "search-and-arrest operations" and other operations carried out by Israeli regime forces, mainly in Jenin and Tulkarm governorates.

Late on Saturday and early Sunday, Palestinian media reported that Israeli forces shot dead five Palestinians in the city of Jenin. Three others were killed in raids elsewhere in the West Bank. Israeli forces raided Jenin "from several directions, firing bullets and surrounding government hospitals and the headquarters of the Red Crescent Society," Palestinian news agency WAFA reported.

According to OCHA, since October 7, Israeli forces have injured more than 3,000 Palestinians, including nearly 500 children. Some violent raids also came amid a four-day truce between the Israeli regime and Hamas in the war-torn Gaza Strip, which also included a prisoners-for-captives swap.

"Between 24 and 26 November, Israeli forces injured 158 Palestinians, including 124 children, during confrontations near the Israeli prison of Ofer, in anticipation of the release of Palestinian detainees as part of the humanitarian pause agreement," OCHA said.

Since the truce, mediated by Qatar and Egypt, went into effect on Friday, 150 Palestinian prisoners or abductees, all women and children, were released from Israeli prisons in four batches. In return, Hamas released 50 Israeli captives held in the Gaza Strip.

On Tuesday, the truce was extended for an additional 48 hours. The Israeli regime released 30 Palestinians and Hamas handed over 12 more captives. The regime denied the families of the released Palestinians to celebrate the occasion.

They were forced to sign a commitment with several restrictions regarding celebrations, gatherings and distribution of sweets or any other expression of joy over the release of their loved ones, on order from the military affairs minister Itamar Ben-Gvir. In some cases, they said, they were taken into custody for questioning and their homes were searched.

Jawdat Bakeer, father of the released Palestinian prisoner Marah Bakeer, who spent 8 years in an Israeli jail on unsubstantiated charges, has said was taken for questioning at a police station in al-Quds and warned against the family showing any signs of joy about her release.

"We've just received her [Marah] but they [Israeli forces] threatened to storm the house and arrest me if we celebrate," he told Al Jazeera.

Emboldened by Israeli forces' near-daily violent raids on Palestinians, there has been an alarming uptick in illegal settlers' violence and property theft against Palestinians as well.

OCHA said since October 7, it has recorded 287 settler attacks against Palestinians, resulting in Palestinian casualties and damage to their property. "This reflects a daily average of almost six incidents, compared with three since the beginning of the year. One-third of these incidents included threats with firearms, including shootings," it added.

On November 25 and 26, OCHA verified two settler attacks which resulted in damage to Palestinian-owned property. "According to Palestinian eyewitnesses, a group of Israeli settlers vandalized 300 olive trees and stole agricultural equipment on the outskirts of Al Khadr (Bethlehem) and Bani Naim (Hebron) villages," OCHA reported.

Settlers have made the past few weeks a nightmare for Palestinians living in the West Bank.

"The children are constantly scared, and they don't play outside anymore, it's too dangerous," a farmer named Ayman Assad was quoted as saying by Al Jazeera.

The 45-year-old father of five said his children are no longer going to school because the Israeli army is blocking many of the roads in the area. All classes have been moved online.

OCHA said that in nearly half of all settler attacks, Israeli forces "either accompanying or actively supporting" the attacking settlers.

Increased settler attacks, under the cover of the regime's genocide in Gaza, have forced Palestinian communities to leave their homes in the past weeks over fears for their safety. "Since October 7th, at least 143 Palestinian households comprising 1,014 people, including 388 children, have been displaced amid settler violence and access restrictions," according to the OCHA.

Settlers are taking advantage of the situation in the Gaza Strip by stepping up the abuse of Palestinians in a calculated effort to seize control of more land. In a recent press release, Israeli rights group B'Tselem said the attacks could be in line with efforts to drive Palestinian communities and single-family farms out of their homes and land.

"[Israel] is exploiting the war to promote its political agenda of taking over more land in the West Bank," the group stated.

"To further this goal, settler violence, backed by Israel, against Palestinians has risen in both frequency and intensity, with soldiers and police officers fully backing the assailants and often participating in the attacks. Events on the ground indicate that under cover of war, settlers are carrying out such assaults virtually unchecked, with no one trying to stop them before, during, or after the fact," it added.

The Israeli military has also imposed heavy restrictions on movement between cities in the West Bank. Media reports reveal that over the past weeks, since the regime unleashed a bombardment campaign against Gaza, Israel has enforced stringent lockdown, especially in Hebron's H2, which Palestinians living in the area describe as the "harshest" ever imposed.

"This has never happened before where a full lockdown is implemented, even during the second Intifada (uprising)," Bassam Abu Aisha, 61, vice president of a local drivers' union was quoted as saying.

Hebron is divided into two sectors. H1, populated entirely by Palestinians and controlled by the Palestinian Authority, accounts for roughly 80 percent of the city. H2, where the Israeli military has full control, accounts for just 20 percent of the city. H2 is populated almost entirely by 35,000 Palestinians. Some 700 Israelis live in illegal settlements there. Reports say residents are only allowed to leave their homes for food every two days between the hours of 18:00-19:00.

H2 residents say Israeli soldiers aim guns at anyone who goes up to their roof or even looks through their window, yelling at them to stay inside. "It's like we are in prison," several residents were quoted as saying in media reports.

Over the past eight weeks, since Israel launched its aggression on Gaza, Palestinians in the occupied West Bank have experienced an intensified Israeli crackdown. According to the Palestinian Prisoners Club, since October 7, more than 3,200 Palestinians have been arrested in the occupied territory. This brings the total number of prisoners to more than 8,000, according to figures released by prisoners' rights groups.

The arrests are most often in response to social media posts in support of Hamas and other resistance groups but sometimes express the plight of people in Gaza, resulting in detentions of Palestinians. Israeli authorities allege that many of these detainees are members of the resistance groups.

According to Addameer, the Palestinian prisoner rights group, conditions inside Israeli prisons have gotten much worse since the onslaught on Gaza seven weeks ago. Palestinian prisoners are experiencing harsher conditions, such as an increase in the incidence and severity of beatings and other forms of torture, electricity being cut off, water being restricted to one hour per day, and clinics shuttered.

Since October 7, at least six Palestinians arrested in the current Israeli witch-hunt in the occupied West Bank have died in Israeli regime prisons.

"It's a war all over, from the West Bank to Gaza to East Jerusalem, the war is on all Palestinians but in different forms," Issa Amro, a prominent Palestinian activist who lives in Hebron, said.

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