

Palestinians accuse Israeli forces of executing 19 civilians in Gaza



An Israeli soldier operates at a location given as the Gaza Strip amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, in this screen grab obtained from a video released on January 8, 2024. Israel Defense Forces/Handout via REUTERS THIS IMAGE HAS BEEN SUPPLIED BY A THIRD PARTY

Gaza City, January 21 (RHC)-- Israeli soldiers executed at least 19 civilians in Gaza City in December, said witnesses who recounted how women and girls were separated from their families, beaten and strip-

searched.

Human rights groups have been gathering testimonies of the alleged summary executions and Al Jazeera has obtained footage and witness accounts from members of one family about the assault that took place on December 19.

"Tanks and bulldozers surrounded the building. Shells had been hitting the building for days. The situation was desperate," said Umm Odai Salem, whose husband was among those killed.

The Israeli soldiers stormed the building. "They banged on our door. My husband ... told them we are all civilians. They took him to another apartment. I followed them, pleading with them to let him go because we are civilians," she said. "They beat me and my daughters. They put us women in one place and threatened us with guns and knives. They made us strip. They searched us, insulting us using the most terrible words," Salem added.

The soldiers disregarded their pleas and proceeded to execute all the men they rounded up outside. "My husband was one of the 19 men killed in this building. They ordered them to bend down and executed them. They killed them all."

The footage shows the bodies of men with the entry holes of bullets in their back.

After the men were killed, the apartment that Salem and her daughters were sheltering in was hit, one of her daughters told Al Jazeera, killing her three-year-old sister, Nada. "I was holding my sister in my arms. Then the shelling resumed. Nada was hit. She made some soft sounds. She asked for some water."

"I thought she was crying. But she was dying. Shrapnel had entered her head, eyes and neck. My sister tried to carry her body but she fell from her arms at the door."

William Schabas, professor of international law at Middlesex University in London, says the footage, along with testimonies, would constitute evidence in the International Criminal Court. "I should add that it's not really important to demonstrate that they're civilians. Summary executions even of fighters, even of combatants is a war crime," he told Al Jazeera.

Schabas, who was a chairperson of the Commission of Inquiry on the 2014 Gaza war, added that beyond testimonies and footage of bodies, prosecutors would need to submit the identity of perpetrators to get this to court in the first place.

"That's one of the great challenges in a situation like this, [which] is actually finding out who were the people who fired the weapons or gave the orders," he said.

Muhammad Shehada, of the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor in Copenhagen, told Al Jazeera his organisation believes there is a pattern of a "systematic" killing taking place on the ground. "In at least 13 of field executions, we corroborated that it was arbitrary on the part of the Israeli forces," said Shehada, the group's chief of programmes and communications.

The monitoring group's members who visited crime scenes and gathered testimonies from witnesses and family members of those who were killed, as well as reports from the health ministry in Gaza, said the soldiers have a sense of impunity.

In December, citing one instance, the United Nations human rights office called for an independent inquiry into allegations that Israeli soldiers executed at least 11 Palestinian men in Gaza in what it called "a possible war crime".

The key issue is how such probes would be conducted, analysts say, since none of the entities that could investigate alleged Israeli crimes against Palestinians is currently allowed into the Gaza Strip.

Many Palestinians have also accused Israeli forces of mistreatment and torture after being held in Israeli prisons.

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