Israel returns decomposed bodies of 89 Palestinians to Gaza

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Gaza City, August 6 (RHC)-- Israel has returned the bodies of nearly 90 Palestinians killed in its military offensive in the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Ministry of Health has announced.

Yamen Abu Suleiman, the director of the Palestinian Civil Emergency Service in Khan Younis in southern Gaza, said on Monday that it was unclear whether the bodies had been dug up from cemeteries by the army during the ground offensive, or whether they were "detainees who had been tortured and killed." He said the bodies would be examined in an attempt to determine the causes of death and to identify them, before being buried in a mass grave at a cemetery near Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis.

Gaza's Government Media Office said Israel had sent 89 bodies as "bones and decomposed bodies in an inhumane manner." It said Israeli forces had "stolen" 2,000 bodies since October 7 from dozens of cemeteries, which they bulldozed during their ongoing military offensive.

The office added that Israeli forces also previously dug up graves in Khan Younis, Jabalia and the Tuffah neighbourhood in Gaza City, and transferred the bodies to "unknown places", an action amounting to a war crime and a crime against humanity.

Hamas said in a statement the bodies were handed over in "a state of complete decomposition, without any ability to determine their identities." "It highlights the sadism of the [Israeli] occupation and the level of crime committed by the Nazi occupation army, which is unprecedented in human history," it said.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military on the return of the bodies. In the past, Israel has said it returned bodies after checks that they were not Israeli hostages who had been held by Hamas since the October 7th attack on Israel.

In Jerusalem, the Israeli Hostages and Missing Families Forum asked why Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would allow the handover of Palestinian bodies without a ceasefire deal with Hamas. "Why are bodies being returned outside the framework of a comprehensive deal? Such an agreement could bring back living hostages for rehabilitation and the deceased for proper burial," the group said in a statement.

Rocketing regional tensions are increasing the desperation of families and friends of the remaining 111 captives, including 39 known to be dead, taken during the October 7th attack.

Critics say Netanyahu, who is facing a corruption trial, prefers to prolong the conflict rather than agree a deal that could upset his hardline coalition partners and tip him out of office.

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