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**QUESTION OF THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE
OCCUPIED ARAB TERRITORIES, INCLUDING PALESTINE**

**Letter dated 19 May 2004 from the Permanent Observer for Palestine
to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the Acting
High Commissioner for Human Rights**

In blatant violation of international law and international humanitarian law, in violation of articles 53 and 147 of the (Fourth) Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, according to which the extensive destruction of property is considered a grave breach, a war crime, constitutes collective punishment and violates the fundamental legal principles of proportionality and distinction, and also in violation of the obligation to treat protected persons at all time with humanity, Israel's illegal actions, devastation of Rafah, crime of ethnic cleansing and war crimes continue.

The Israeli Supreme Court of Justice on Sunday, 16 May 2004 rejected a petition by residents of the largely destroyed Rafah refugee camp by Israeli occupation forces in the southern Gaza Strip for a ban on further demolitions of their homes, thus giving the go-ahead for the Israeli army to further demolish homes in a poverty-stricken Gaza Strip refugee camp.

Israeli Minister of Defence Shaul Mofaz has publicly announced that "Operation Rainbow", Israel's military action in Rafah, will continue as long as necessary, thus giving Israeli authorities carte blanche to continue demolishing Palestinian homes, injuring and killing Palestinians in the process and leaving thousands of people homeless.

Israeli occupation forces have been systematically levelling the refugee camps of Rafah since September 2000, razing 1,026 houses and damaging 767 more. It is estimated that at least 200 Palestinian homes have been totally or partially demolished in the first 15 days of May 2004, leaving over 1,500 Palestinians homeless, bringing the total number of people who

have lost their homes in the Gaza Strip to the shocking number of 17,594 according to UNRWA. Israel has demolished more than 3,000 homes since September 2000, most of them in the impoverished Gaza Strip, and levelled 10 per cent of Gaza Strip's farmland.

These events in Gaza City are not the first time that Israeli authorities have conducted mass demolitions of Palestinian homes: the Israeli military razed scores of homes in Rafah in October 2003. In addition, Israel demolished hundreds of Palestinian homes in Jenin in April 2002.

Furthermore, the Israeli occupation forces continue to use excessive force against Palestinian civilians. On Tuesday, 18 May 2004, Israeli occupation forces sealed off the already devastated southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah and two nearby refugee camps as a prelude to a massive spree of extrajudicial killings of Palestinians and a mass demolition of homes in Rafah, leaving at least 15 Palestinians, including worshippers, dead. At Tuesday dawn prayers, an Israeli occupation forces United States-made helicopter gunship fired two missiles at the mosque of Bilal Bin Rabah in Tel Al-Sultan, west of the Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip, killing at least four Palestinian worshippers.

Earlier, at least eight Palestinians were killed overnight Tuesday when Israeli occupation forces Apache helicopters fired three missiles at the southern Gaza Strip refugee camp of Rafah. The missile strikes wounded at least 23 others, some of them as they were leaving the mosque following prayers. Part of the mosque was set on fire.

On Friday, 14 May 2004, Israeli occupation forces buried a man, Ashraf Qatshah, 38, his wife and her sister alive under the rubble when they refused to evacuate their home before the occupation troops demolished it together with at least 39 houses in the southern Gaza Strip.

Separately, the Israeli occupation forces on Friday demolished a Palestinian detainee's house in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Since Tuesday, 11 May, Israeli occupation forces have intensified their deadly military attacks and carried out yet another raid in the densely populated Gaza City neighbourhood of Zeitoun. The raid was carried out by Israeli ground forces, backed by dozens of Israeli armoured carriers, tanks, helicopter gunships and navy ships.

At least 30 Palestinians were killed and more than 200 others were wounded during this invasion into Gaza City. Israeli occupation forces opened fire on Palestinian ambulances and medical staff, which prevented the evacuation of the wounded and resulted in an increase in the number of martyrs. The Israeli occupation forces also denied access of international humanitarian assistance, food and medicine to the victims of the Israeli invasions.

In addition to the casualties and the serious injuries caused by the latest Israeli incursion into Gaza, the Israeli occupation forces raided numerous homes, terrorizing many families throughout the town, blasted their way into Palestinian homes and buildings, causing serious damage and destruction, and swept through agricultural lands in the Al-Zeitoun neighbourhood. They also shelled the main electrical generator, which led to a cut in electrical power. Huge Israeli occupation forces bulldozers also uprooted trees, crushed cars and destroyed parts of the main road and water pipes.

Israeli occupation forces troops also destroyed five workshops, blew off the doors of several buildings, where they set up rooftop observation posts manned by snipers, and razed 13 houses in the refugee camp of Khan Younis.

On Sunday, 9 May 2004, Israeli occupation forces troops stormed into Jerusalem's north-eastern neighbourhood of Abu Dis, killing 19-year-old Fadi Sha'lan while he was standing in front of a sports club.

On Saturday, 8 May 2004, Israeli occupation forces troops stationed north-east of Gaza City shot dead two Palestinians.

A day before, Israeli occupation forces extrajudicially assassinated Sae'd Ibrahim Mssaie'i, 28, and Wae'l Abed, 28 in the northern West Bank refugee camp of Nur Shams near Tulkarem.

The same day, Israeli occupation forces shot dead 18-year-old Basim Kalbouneh with a bullet in the head while he was standing on the roof of his house in the northern West Bank city of Nablus.

Earlier, Israeli occupation forces shot dead a Palestinian and critically wounded another in the northern West Bank village of Beita, near Nablus.

For all these violations, war crimes and State-sponsored terrorism, Israel, the occupying Power, must be held accountable and the perpetrators must be brought to justice.

Tragically, the toll of death and destruction throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, continues to rise almost daily, and the humanitarian catastrophe on the ground continues to deteriorate as Israel continues to pursue all of its illegal policies and practices against the Palestinian people.

As a result of these Israeli aggressions and war crimes, at least 3,000 Palestinians have been killed and over 27,000 others injured since September 2000; scores of them are children, women and elderly people.

In the light of the escalation of the war crimes, State terrorism and systematic human rights violations committed by the Israeli occupation forces against the Palestinian people, mainly since September 2000, we once again appeal to Your Excellency and through you to the international community to condemn Israel for the continued frenzied demolition of homes in the densely populated refugee camps; to call on the Israeli Government to halt its demolition of Palestinian homes in the town of Rafah in the Gaza Strip and all over the Occupied Palestinian Territories immediately; to urge Israel to take steps to respect the dignity of the Palestinian people; to immediately intervene to stop the catastrophe in Rafah; to stop the Israeli onslaught and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians; to act to bring an end to all Israeli actions against the

Palestinian people and to ensure Israel's compliance with international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention, and its obligations as an occupying Power by immediately halting such actions, which are tantamount to collective punishment and a clear violation of international law.

I would be most grateful if you could arrange to have this letter distributed as an official document to the members of the Commission on Human Rights at its sixty-first session, under its agenda item 8.

(Signed): Nabil RAMLAWI
Ambassador
Permanent Observer
