



Israeli Military Aggression on the Gaza Strip May 2021: House Demolitions



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Introduction

The report covers the human tragedy of thousands of Palestinians whose homes were destroyed by the Israeli occupation forces (IOF) in its May 2021 military aggression on the Gaza Strip. At the moment, thousands live in temporary housing arrangements as the reconstruction efforts are yet to start, six months after the end of the aggression.

The report addresses the Israeli occupation's systematic practices displayed in May, where civilian homes were premeditatedly targeted; destroying thousands of houses with varying degrees of destruction: total destruction, substantial partial damage, and partial damage. As per Palestinian human rights organizations' data, 7,680 residential units were destroyed in the aggression: 1,313 totally destroyed; 6,367 partially. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Public Works announced that 57,186 residential units were damaged in the attacks, including 1,514 totally destroyed units, 88 units sustained substantial partial damage making them unsafe for human use; and 54,792 units were partially damaged.

The aggression aggravated the housing crisis in the Gaza Strip, as it had a 100,000 unit deficit pre-aggression. This is mainly caused by the unjust Israeli closure, ongoing for 15 years now, and the restrictions on imports of construction materials, the dire economic situation in the Gaza Strip, and the repeated Israeli military operations; as well as the natural population growth.

Although the housing sector was among the most compensated sectors, benefiting from previous reconstruction and financing programs; there are still 1,300 residential units that were completely destroyed in the 2014 Israeli military offensive on Gaza, and 75,000 partially destroyed ones, awaiting reconstruction, as per the statistics of the Ministry of Public Works and Housing.

The report reviews the obstacles and challenges facing the reconstruction process for houses destroyed in the May 2021 aggression, and attributes delays to two major findings:

- 1.The strict Israeli closure and the restrictions on the import of construction materials, and
- 2.Delays in donors' fulfilment of their pledges for reconstruction, which they offered immediately after the end of the aggression.

The report affirms that this delay is a flagrant breach of people's right to enjoy an adequate shelter. Its findings also support the conclusion that Israel's premeditated attacks on Palestinians' houses in the Gaza Strip is in breach of the rule of the international humanitarian law (IHL), particularly the Fourth Geneva Convention which prohibits occupying powers from destroyed the properties of the people living in the occupied territory. Additionally, the Israeli closure police, its restrictions on the entry of construction materials, and denying people the right to build their homes is in contradiction with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights



I. House Demolition Policy in 2021 Israeli Aggression

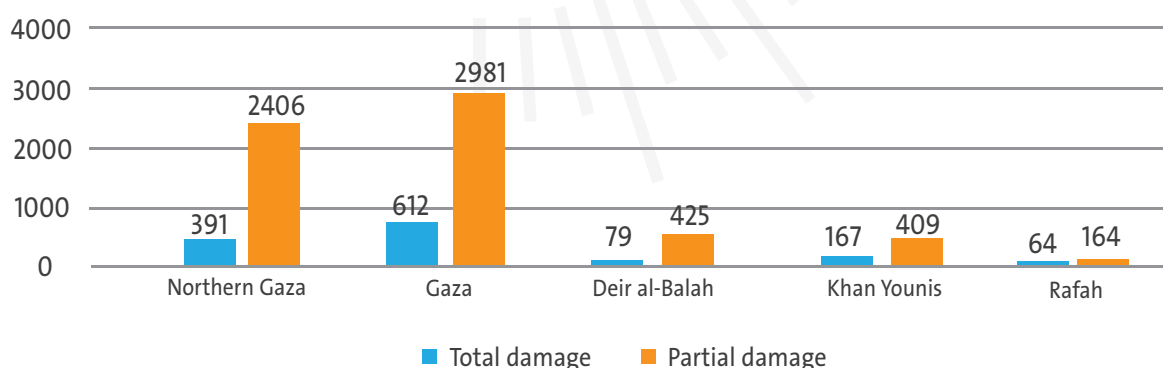
During the Israeli full-scale aggression on the Gaza Strip, Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) deliberately and directly targeted Palestinian civilians' houses, including a complete destruction of residential buildings over its residents' heads and an indiscriminate bombardment of residential neighborhoods. Also, IOF bombarded residential towers after few minutes of warning its residents and without giving them sufficient time to evacuate or vacate their essential belongings.

According to the documentation of Palestinian human rights organizations, the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip has led to the destruction of 7680 housing units; 1313 of them have completely destroyed while 6367 have partially destroyed.

Table 1: Damaged residential units grouped by damage degree and governorate as per Palestinian human rights organizations' data¹

| Governorate | Total damage | Partial damage |
|---------------|--------------|----------------|
| Northern Gaza | 391 | 2406 |
| Gaza | 612 | 2981 |
| Deir al-Balah | 79 | 425 |
| Khan Younis | 167 | 409 |
| Rafah | 64 | 146 |
| Total | 1313 | 6367 |

Figure 1: Damaged residential units grouped by damage degree and governorate as per Palestinian human rights organizations' data



According to the statistics of Palestinian human rights organizations, housing units 10218 persons, including 38020 completely and partially damaged has been sheltered children. Following table shows the distribution of affected persons 17444 women and as per to governorate

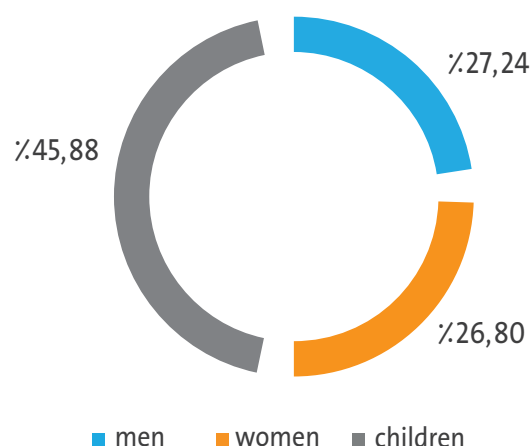
¹Palestinian human rights organizations conducted a collaborative fieldwork data collection effort between Al-Haq, PCHR, and Al Mezan

Table 2: Damaged units and affected persons grouped by governorate²

| Governorate | Number of Units | Permanent residents | Women | Children |
|---------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Northern Gaza | 2797 | 15641 | 4146 | 7387 |
| Gaza | 3580 | 16786 | 4537 | 7451 |
| Deir al-Balah | 504 | 1698 | 458 | 785 |
| Khan Younis | 576 | 2712 | 764 | 1235 |
| Rafah | 210 | 1183 | 313 | 586 |
| Total | 7667 | 38020 | 10218 | 17444 |

Criteria used by Palestinian human rights organizations in documenting the destroyed housing differed from those used by the Ministry of Public Works and Housing in Gaza. This difference is in to two main factors: -1 Housing units that sustained minor damage such as breaking windows have been included within the statistics of the Ministry of Public Works and Housing, increasing the number of affected housing units in the ministry documentation. -2 Categories of the classification; human rights organizations classify the affected housing units into two categories: complete damage and partial damage, while the Ministry of Public Works and Housing classifies them into three categories: a partial damage, a moderate damage, and a minor damage.

Figure 2: Gender and age group percentage among victims



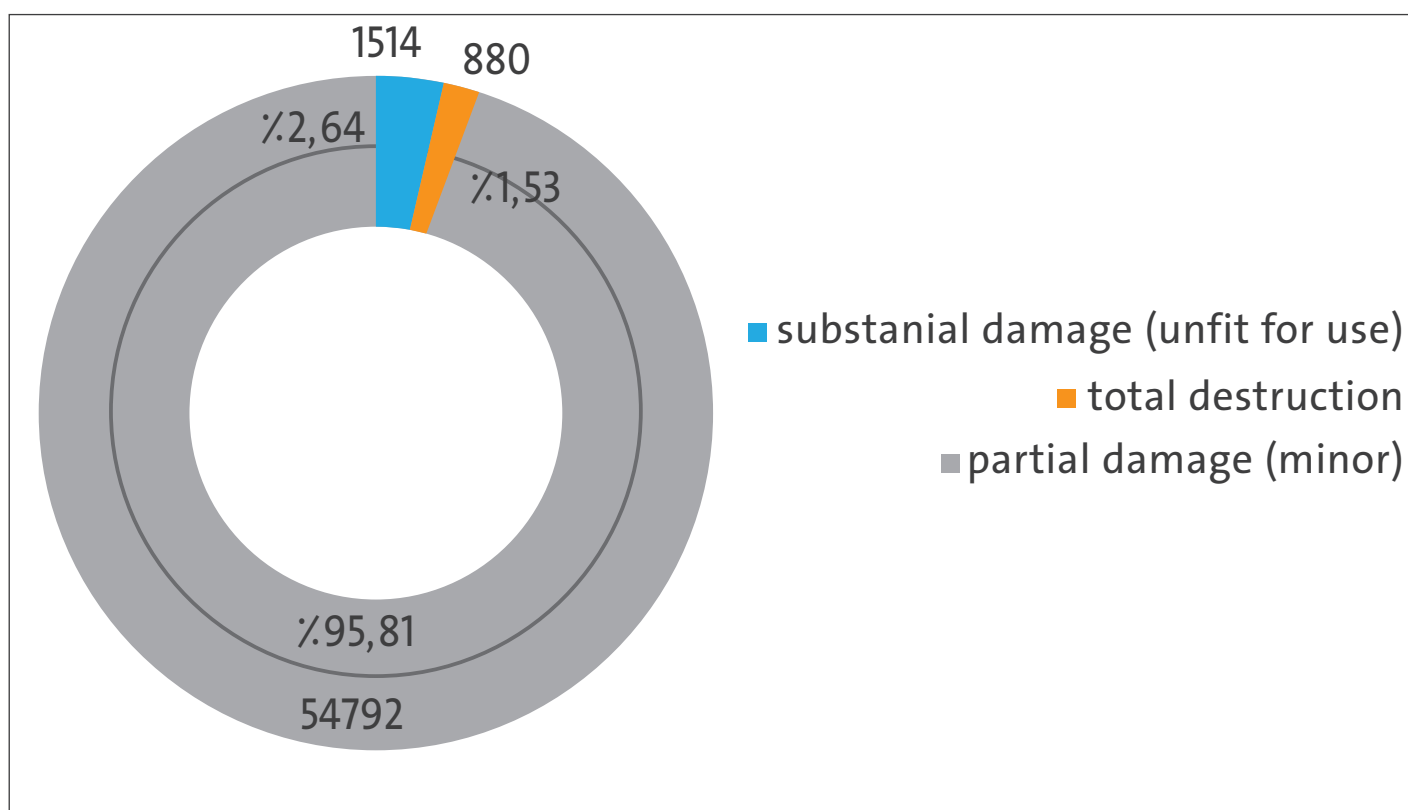
As for the Ministry of Public Works and Housing's documentation, 57186 housing units sustained damage during the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip; 1514 (2.64%) sustained a complete damage, 880 (1.53%) sustained irreparable damage, 54792 (95.81%) sustained partial, moderate, and minor damage.

Table 3: Damaged Units per damage degree³

| Statement | Partial destruction | Total destruction | Substantial destruction | Total |
|------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------|
| No. | 54792 | 1514 | 880 | 57186 |
| Percentage | 95.81% | 2.64% | 1.53% | 100% |

³Data obtained by PCHR researcher from the Ministry of Public Works and Housing on 15 September 2021

Figure 3: Damage degree inflicted on residential units in the May 2021 IOF aggression



According to the Ministry of Public Works and Housing's geographical distribution for housing units that has completely destroyed during the aggression: 858 housing units in Gaza City, 388 units in northern Gaz Strip, 142 in Khan Yunis, 66 in central Gaza Strip, and 60 units in Rafah.

Also, housing units that sustained irreparable damage were as follows: 350 units in northern Gaza Strip, 226 units in Gaza City, 141 units in central Gaza Strip, 135 in Khan Yunis, and 28 units in Rafah.

The number of housing units that were partially, moderately and minorly destroyed was as follows: 29966 units in northern Gaza Strip, 114672 units in Gaza City, 3589 units in central Gaza Strip, 5805 units in Khan Yunis, and 1905 units in Rafah.

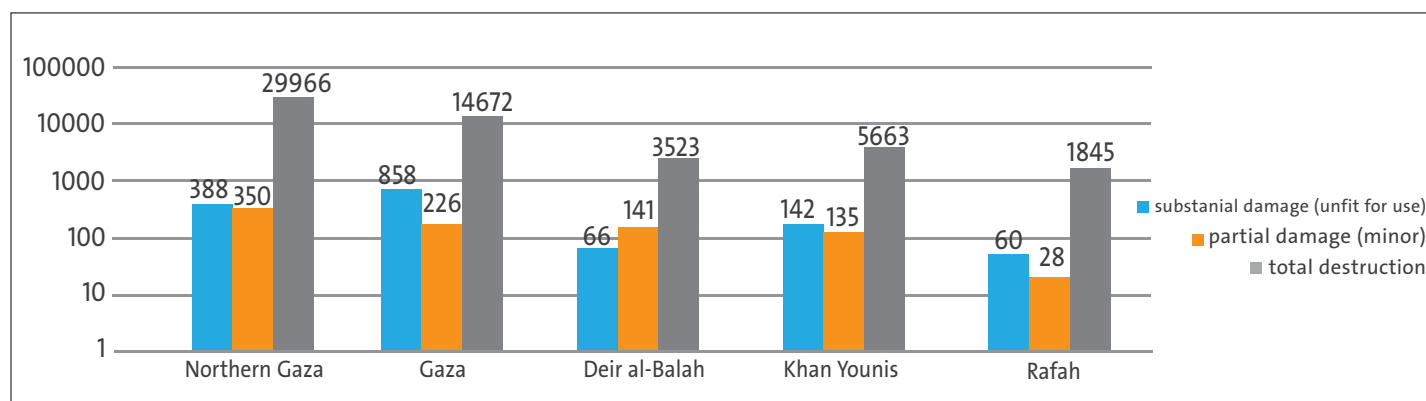
Table 4: Geographic distribution of damaged residential units⁴

| Governorate | Total destruction | Substantial destruction | Partial destruction | Total |
|---------------|-------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Northern Gaza | 388 | 350 | 29966 | 30354 |
| Gaza | 858 | 226 | 14672 | 15533 |
| Deir al-Balah | 66 | 141 | 3523 | 3589 |
| Khan Younis | 142 | 135 | 5663 | 5805 |
| Rafah | 60 | 28 | 1845 | 1905 |
| Total | 1514 | 880 | 54792 | 57186 |

⁴Data obtained by PCHR researcher from the Ministry of Public Works and Housing on 15 September 2021

⁵As per latest damage assessment updates by the Ministry of Public Works and Housing

Figure 4: Geographic distribution of damaged residential units



It is worth noting that the housing sector suffers from a deficit in housing units that exceeded 100,000 housing units, in order to accommodate the annual population increase, which exceeds 3% annually. Also, more than 25,000 housing units in the Gaza Strip should be demolished and re-constructed, in addition to more than 60,000 existing and inhabited units that should be restored and rehabilitated to meet the minimum requirements for adequate housing.

Moreover, reports issued by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics indicates that 20% of Palestinian families in the Gaza Strip are living in overcrowded housing units (more than 3 persons in one room). Due to the Israeli closure imposed on Gaza, at least 70% of Palestinian families in Gaza do not have the ability to build new housing units or renovate their.

According to the Ministry of Public Works and Housing's statistics, the total number of direct damage to housing units amounted to about 144,7 million dollars. Following table shows estimate of direct damage:

Table 5: Estimate of direct damage to housing sector⁸

| Governorate | Total destruction | Substantial damage | Partial damage |
|--|-------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Total | 1514 | 880 | 54792 |
| Damage in Million USD | 75,3 | 9,18 | 60,27 |
| Total of direct damage to housing sector/million USD | 144,75 | | |

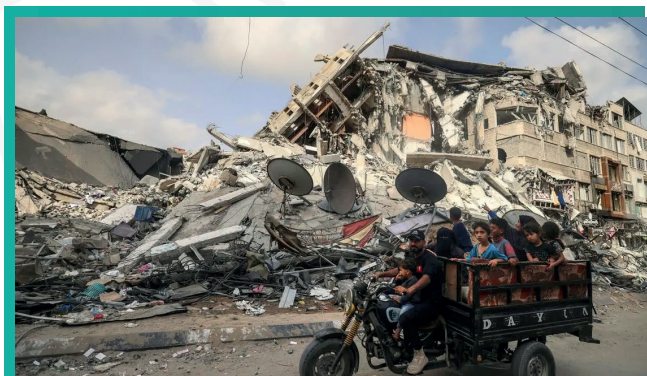
⁷Report issued by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Axis II: Adequate housing indicators strategies in Palestine, from the study of Sustainable housing development in Palestine 2020, page (95).

⁸Data (non-published) obtained by PCHR researcher from the governmental reconstruction committee's report on 5 September 2021

The losses caused by the aggression were not limited to the direct damage costs, but also include other financial losses such as relief payments, rent allowance for families whose houses were destroyed or sustained severe damage, costs of construction vehicles that removed the rubble and completed the demolition of completely destroyed houses to protect the residents of the surrounding areas. Additionally, the losses included the costs of removing rubble from streets to re-open them and strengthening the ramshackle buildings. All the above mentioned costs were estimated at 14 million dollars, according to the Ministry of Public Works and Housing. Following table shows all costs and losses:

Table 6: Additional losses inflicted on the housing sector in Million USD⁹

| | Type of direct loss | No. | Estimated total million USD |
|--------------|---|---------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | month rent allowance for-18 Urgent relief and cases of complete destruction | 1,200 | 7,8 |
| 2 | month rent allowance for-9 Urgent relief and (substantial damage cases (unfit for use | 800 | 3,0 |
| 3 | Urgent maintenance of partially destroyed units (extreme or posing threat to public | 100 | 0,25 |
| 4 | Rubble removal (ton) | 275,000 | 2,75 |
| 5 | Cost of construction vehicles (work hour) | 4000 | 0,28 |
| 6 | Damage assessment | — | 0,1 |
| Total | | | 14,18 |



Attacks on Residential Towers

IOF repeatedly targeted residential towers during the aggression on the Gaza Strip in May 2021, which caused complete and partial destruction on several towers. According to the Ministry of Public Works and Housing, there were 458 demolished housing units in the multi-owner buildings and towers, representing 30% of the total completely demolished housing units. PCHR's fieldworkers documented the targeting of 10 towers by Israeli warplanes during the aggression;

5 of them were completely destroyed: Hanady, al-Jawhara, al-Shorouq, al-Jalaa, and Anas Ibn Malek; whereas 5 other towers were partially destroyed: al-Sousi, al-Jundi, al-Rawda, al-Andalous, and al-Qahera.

On the 2nd day of aggression, Tuesday 11 May 2021, Israeli warplanes initiated to target residential towers, as Hanady towers was directly bombarded with 7 missiles and completely destroyed. Hanady tower is located in western Gaza City near Gaza Seaport and comprised of 14 floors, including dozens of apartments, institution, and offices.

On the same day, al-Jawhara tower, which is located at al-Jalaa and al-Wehda streets intersection, in the center of Gaza City, was directly targeted with 8 missiles and completely destroyed. Al-Jawhara tower is comprised of 11 floors, including residential apartments, offices, institutions, and medical clinics.

On 13 May 2021, Israeli warplanes directly bombarded al-Shorouq tower, which is located on Omar al-Mukhtar Street in al-Rimal neighborhood, and comprised of 14 floors, including headquarters of various media and civil institutions, and completely destroyed it.

On 15 May 2021, Israeli warplanes fired 6 missiles at al-Jalaa tower, which is located on al-Jalaa Street in central Gaza City, and comprised of 12 floors, including residential apartments, law firms, and international and local companies and institutions, and completely destroyed it.

Husam Jawad Mahdi (47), a businessman living in al-Jalaa tower in Gaza City, which was destroyed by IOF aggression on the Gaza Strip, said to PCHR's fieldworker that:

“My father, my sons and I are living in al-Jalaa tower, as we own 14 residential apartments and the roof, constituting (٪30) of the total apartments in the tower. Also, we own the basement, which is leased, as well as Jawad Mahdi and his sons' General Trading Company located on the ground floor. At approximately 15:00 on Saturday, 15 May 2021, the tower's guard and my father received a phone call from Israeli Intelligence Service informing them to evacuate the tower within 10 minutes. My father asked the intelligence officer to give them time to vacate as much belongings as possible from the tower, but in vain. The tower was completely destroyed after less than an hour, and IOF did not give us enough time to take any essential thing either from our residential apartments or the company which contained all documents and commercial contracts. The destruction of the tower inflicted heavy losses on us as well as my family was pulled apart as we became live in various places. Additionally, we are living now on hard days, especially after losing our house and company. I hope that our suffering will be ended and the al-Jalaa tower will be rebuilt again as soon as possible.”

On 16 May 2021, Israeli warplanes fired 6 missiles at 3 residential buildings "Anas Ibn Malek towers", each building is built in an area of 1,5 dunums, comprised of 7 floors and located on al-Yarmouk Street in Gaza City. The 3 buildings were completely destroyed.

Table 7: List of targeted towers during the aggression

| No. | Name | Location | Floors | Contents | Damage |
|-----|----------------|-----------|---|---|---------------------|
| 1 | Al-Jundi | Gaza City | 12 | Residential apartments | Partial (apartment) |
| 2 | Hanadi | Gaza City | 14 | Residential apartments offices organizations | Total |
| 3 | Al-Jawhara | Gaza City | 11 | Residential apartments, offices organizations, clinics | Total |
| 4 | Al-Sousi | Gaza City | 14 | Residential apartments | Partial (apartment) |
| 5 | Al-Shorouq | Gaza City | 14 | Media and civilian offices | Total |
| 6 | Al-Jalaa | Gaza City | 12 | Residential apartments, lawyer offices, companies, local and international | Total |
| 7 | Anas Bin Malek | Gaza City | adjacent buildings 3 (floors/each 7) | media agencies Residential apartments | Total |
| 8 | Al-Rawda | Gaza City | 6 | Residential apartments | Partial (apartment) |
| 9 | Al-Andalous | Gaza City | 11 | Residential apartments | Partial (apartment) |
| 10 | Al-Qahera | Gaza City | 11 | Residential apartments | Partial (apartment) |



Bombing Residential Compounds

During the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, dozens of Israeli warplanes simultaneously and completely targeted several residential compounds, causing massive destruction on residential houses and on main and sub streets.

According to PCHR's documentation, on 13 May 2021, Israeli warplanes bombarded with tens of missiles a residential compound on Beit Lahia main street near al-Sheikh Zayed intersection. As a result, 9 residential houses sheltering 15 families were completely destroyed.

On the same day, Israeli artilleries fired dozens of shells at a residential neighborhood in Um al-Naser " Bedouin " village, north of Beit Lahia, without a prior warning. As a result, 8 residential houses sustained serious and irreparable damage. Also, 6 civilians, including an infant, a girl and 3 women, were killed.

On the same day, Israeli warplanes targeted with dozens of missiles a whole residential neighborhood in Beit Hanoun in northern Gaza Strip. As a result, 15 residential houses were completely and partially destroyed.

Rabah Ibrahim Saleem al-Madhoun (60), married with 10 children and lives in Beit Lahia near al-Sheikh Zayed intersection, said to PCHR's fieldworker that:

"At approximately 00:30 on Wednesday, 13 May 2021, my house and other nearby houses were targeted by Israeli warplanes. As result, my house and 9 other houses were completely destroyed, as well as other houses in the neighborhood sustained considerable damage. My house is comprised of 3 floors built in an area of 250 square meters. Each floor contains 2 apartments, in addition to the ground floor that includes shops, a law firm, Faten Institution known as "Palestine for Credit and Development", and two apartments. The three floors contain residential apartments sheltering tenants and my son, and English education center. After destroying my house, we became homeless, and now we are living in our relatives houses. Also, the life became extremely difficult, especially that we did not take anything from our destroyed house, except for clothes that we were wearing. Now, I am in dire financial straits, particularly after I lost my only source of income, which was the rented shops and residential apartments in my building. I barely spend on my sons who are studying at universities, and on the other who are unemployed."

On 16 May 2021, Israeli warplanes bombarded without a prior warning a residential compound, including 4 adjacent buildings, on al-Wehda Street in al-Rimal neighborhood in central Gaza City, and completely destroyed them. The targeted buildings were: Abul-Ouf family building, 2 buildings belonging to al-Kolak family and al-Ahlam building. This attack resulted in the murder of 42 civilians, including 11 children and 16 women.

On the same day, Israeli warplanes targeted with several missiles a residential neighborhood in al-Maghazi camp in central Gaza Strip. As a result, 6 houses were completely destroyed, while other nearby houses sustained serious and partial damage.

Riyad Hussain Muneeb Ishkontana (42), married with 5 children and lives in Abul-Ouf family building that was destroyed over its residents heads on al-Wehda Street in Gaza City, said PCHR's fieldworker that:

"I rented an apartment in the 3rd floor of Abul-Ouf building. My apartment has a north-west facing direction. I am married 'Abeer Nimer Ali "Rahim" Ishkontana and we have 5 children: Dana (9), Suzi (7), Lana (6), Yehia (5), and Zain (2). At approximately 12:30 on Sunday, 16 May 2021, while my wife and I were watching news of Israeli aggression on Gaza Strip at T.V, I went to check on my children at their room. During which, I was shocked as I saw a red glow in my house. After that, the house walls started to collapse and stones fell over us. Additionally, the apartment's floor was split apart. I did not know what was happening or what happened to my family members. While I was under the rubble, I heard my son Zain shouting Baba! Baba! I then heard my daughter Dana shouting Baba! Baba! At that time, I could not be able to move due to the rubble on my chest and feet, and my head was bleeding. Few minutes later, Zain and Dana's shouting was stopped and I was no longer hear them. I remained under the rubble for several hours, and I was bleeding and sustained various wounds. From time to time, I was yelling at my sons and wife, but I did not hear them. At approximately 07:00, a young man was looking for his brother under the rubble, I heard him and called him to help me. He heard me and summoned civil defense staff that retrieved me from under the rubble and took me to I-Shifa Hospital for treatment. I was in serious health condition. At hospital, I was informed that all my family members died and my daughter Suzi still alive. "

Fadi 'Ali 'Atiyah 'Arafat (43), married with 5 children and lives in al-Salam neighborhood in Rafah, said to PCHR's fieldworker that:

"My family and I are living in a -4story residential building built on an area of 350 square meters; each floor contains 2 apartments. The building shelters my brothers and their 8 families, including 54 members. At approximately 21:55 on Thursday, 13 May 2021, Israeli warplanes bombarded our residential building and completely destroyed it, causing partial damage to nearby house. It should be noted that before targeting the building, IOF phoned my brother and ordered him to evacuate our houses and other nearby houses. We could not imagine what happened to us until now. Our house and its contents became rubble. After the destruction of our residential building, my brothers and I rented houses, despite our difficult financial situation."



Ineffective and Inadequate warning for civilians

According to the rules of international humanitarian law, occupation forces should give civilians adequate warning before conducting their military operations in order to leave the areas that will be targeted and to be able to protect themselves and to take their essential belongings. During the Israeli aggression on Gaza Strip, IOF did not respect or consider the commitment relevant to warning civilians, which inflicted many casualties and doubled the civilians' suffering.

In limited cases, IOF warned residential buildings that were targeted during the aggression and the residents. They used two means for warning civilians: First, via phone call with house owners or the guards of residential towers and buildings that were targeted. Second, firing one or more missiles by the drone on the houses' roofs.

These means of warning were ineffective as it did not give civilians enough time to leave their houses or take their essential belongings and document. Also, sometime, it was not known which of the targeted houses that the Israeli officer talked about, as he only ordered the residents to leave their houses.

In other cases, residents who received warning left their houses, but the bombardment unfortunately caused damage to other nearby houses and injuries among its residents who did not receive warning. In many cases, IOF targeted civilians' houses without prior warning, which inflicted a large number of casualties during this aggression. Therefore, the means of warning used by IOF during the aggression on the Gaza Strip were often ineffective, as it did not give civilians enough time to be able to protect themselves. In other cases, IOF never warn civilians, as they targeted houses and destroyed them over its residents' heads without warning. Therefore, IOF committed two violations: -1 targeting civilian houses. -2 Failure to provide safeguards consistent with international humanitarian law to protect civilians during military operations by giving them sufficient time to leave the targeted houses.

Ismail Mahmoud Mohammed al-Khawalda (48), from al-Amal neighborhood in western Khan Yunis, whose house was targeted without prior warning, said to PCHR's fieldworker that:

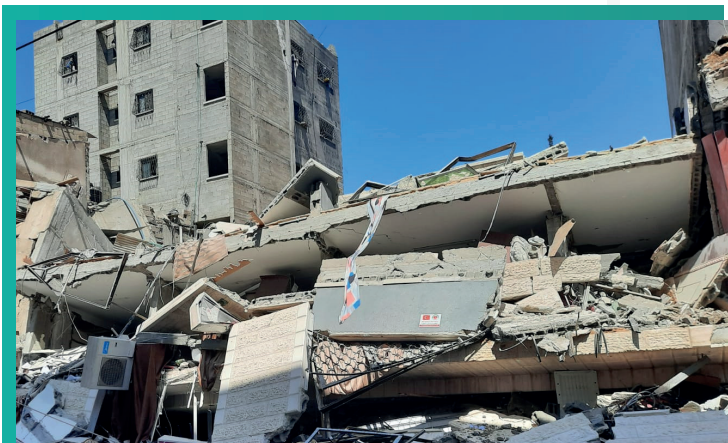
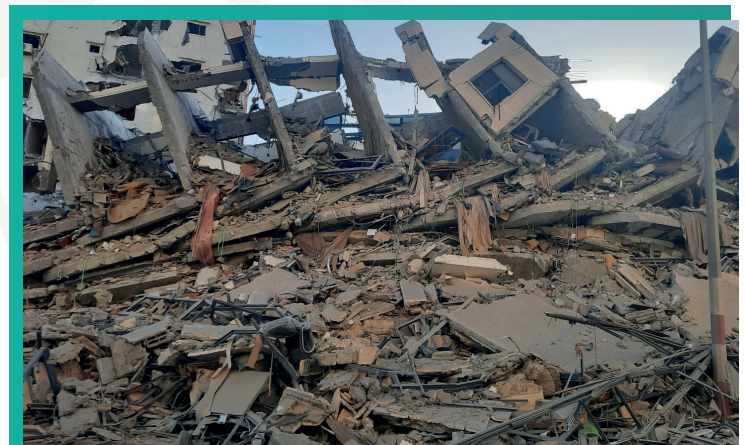
"My family comprised of 8 members and I are living in the top floor of 5 -storey building. Our apartment is roof with tin plates. At approximately 14:25 on Wednesday, 12 May 2021, the tin plates fell over us and there was a lot of dust blocking the view. Few minutes later, I realized that that a missile hit our apartment, causing a hole 50 meters away from me. The missile penetrated our ceiling and the ceiling of an apartment on the 4th floor. I knew that the missile fired by a drone, so I shouted at my family members to get out and evacuate the house immediately. We got down quickly while the vision was unclear due to dust and smoke. During which, I felt that my head is bleeding. When I got out of the building, the noticed that the upper stories of the building sustained acute damage and knew that the building was targeted by Israeli warplanes not drones. we miraculously survived. After that, I knew that an Israeli warplanes fired without prior warning 2 missiles at our residential building; one of them fell and penetrated the ceiling heading down to the lower stories. The missile fell about half a meter from where I was sitting. As a result, my house was completely destroyed, while nearby houses sustained damage. Also, The bombing also left my daughter paralyzed after falling from the 5th floor onto the street due to the blast explosion. Additionally, my neighbor and her daughter living on the 3rd floor were killed."

Mohammed Ramadan 'Ali Saleh (42), married with 5 children and lives in Jabalia refugee camp, said to PCHR's fieldworker that:

"At approximately 05:05 on Wednesday dawn, 19 May 2021, IOF phoned my neighbors Zakaria al-Shrafi and 'Alaa Salha and ordered them to inform the neighborhood residents to evacuate as they want to target my house as well as my father and my brothers' houses, which are 4 housing units established on an area of 240 square meters. Each housing unit is built in an area of 60 square meters, some of them are roofed with tin plates while others with concrete roof. The housing units shelter 24 members, including 5 women and 14 children. At approximately 05:40, after 35 minutes of targeting our housing units with a missile fired by a drone, Israeli warplanes bombarded the units and completely destroyed them. Also, nearby houses sustained considerable damage. After that, we went to UNRWA schools, which were overcrowded, because many families resorted there fearing for the bombardment or after being homeless. As a result, each of us went to the father-in-law's house until the end of the aggression on 21 May 2021."

Mohammed Khaled Mahmoud 'Arafah (30), member of a family of 6, including his father, mother, brothers: Nader and Mahmoud and a sister, Hadeel, lives in al-Amal neighborhood in Khan Yunis. He said to PCHR's fieldworker:

“We lived in our apartment on the third floor of a -5apartment residential building, where other families also lived. At around 14:20 on Wednesday, 12 May 2021, my mother, sister, and I were in the apartment as my mother was in her bedroom, Hadeel in the living room and I was in the bathroom performing ablution to pray. Meanwhile, my father and brothers were outside. Suddenly, I saw intense black clouds of dust covering the house and I could not see anything in front of me. After the dust cleared out, I saw that the house walls were destroyed, and some rubble fell on my body. I thought it was a missile from an Israeli drone and another missile will be launched from a warplane. I immediately jumped to a -3storey neighboring house belonging to Ramadan family that is side by side to my flat. I went into the street shocked and wounded and was then taken to Naser Hospital, where doctors said I sustained shrapnel wound in the left side. I knew later that IOF's warplanes launched 2 missiles at our house; the missiles penetrated the fourth and fifth floors. As a result, a missile hit my mother, throwing her outside our apartment and killing her immediately while the other missile hit the living room and killed my sister after throwing her outside as well. Now, I moved to live temporarily in Hamad Housing Project, where we rented a house and some associations helped us furnishing the house and having the basic needs.”



Delayed reconstruction of the destroyed housing units

Thousands of housing units that were destroyed during the Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip have not been reconstructed yet while only a limited number of the housing units that sustained partial damage are being reconstructed although the offensive ended more than 6 months ago.

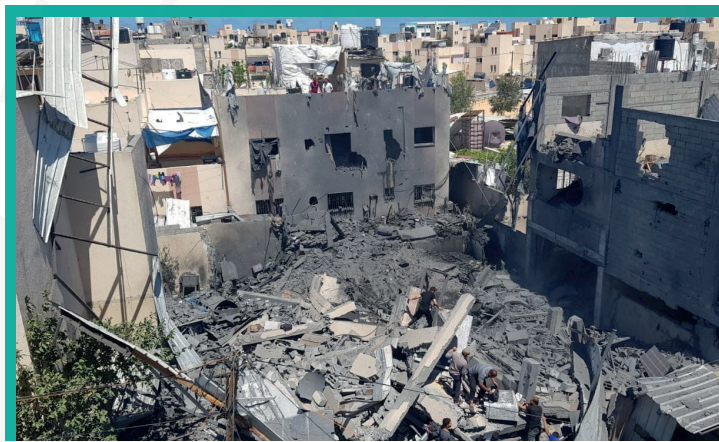
The delayed reconstruction of these housing units can be attributed to two main reasons: one is the restrictions imposed on the entry of construction materials into the Gaza Strip especially during the 3 months that followed the end of the aggression and the second is international donors' not honoring their financial commitments for the reconstruction that they promised after the end of the aggression on the Strip.

Eng. Naji Sarhan, Undersecretary of the Gaza Ministry of Public Works and Housing, said to PCHR's fieldworker that the reconstruction process following the latest offensive in May 2021 has not started yet due to the Israeli restrictions on the entry of construction materials necessary for beginning the reconstruction. As a result, thousands of housing units have not been reconstructed yet as well as delaying implementing development and economic projects in the Gaza Strip. Sarhan added that IOF imposed tightened restrictions on the entry of construction materials, particularly the construction steel, in the first 3 months following the offensive, and only a month ago IOF allowed the entry of the construction materials but in limited quantities.

Sarhan emphasized that the Ministry is ready to start the reconstruction process as soon as the restrictions are lifted and free entry of construction materials is allowed. Moreover, the reconstruction process requires receipt of donations necessary for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip. Sarhan added that the amount of destruction and damage required cooperative efforts from all the official governmental bodies and private sectors as well as international organizations as the Ministry almost finished the removal of rubble to pave the way towards reconstructing the destroyed buildings during the upcoming period. He stressed that the international organizations disbursed payments to the affected citizens such as rents until their destroyed houses are reconstructed.

Sarhan underscored that over the past few months the reconstruction materials entered the Gaza Strip and are now available at the market except for the steel that was only allowed in September 2021 and not within the GRM. Moreover, what is now obstructing the reconstruction process is Qatar's not disbursing the funds they pledged for the reconstruction as well as implementing the Egyptian-funded reconstruction project. Sarhan believes there is another challenge facing and hindering the reconstruction: some international organizations are still sticking to the GRM although the construction materials freely entered without this mechanism.

Sarhan said that Hamas funded the construction of 37,000 housing units that were partially destroyed (minor damage) and need only 500 dollars to be repaired. Regarding the waited mechanism for the reconstruction of the destroyed housing units, Sarhan said that the reconstruction will happen after the costs will be estimated, and the housing unit's owner will be given the payments needed to reconstruct his house as he wants, provided that the house design meet with the minimum humanitarian requirements/ conditions of the reconstruction process. Sarhan emphasized that the Ministry will also include within the next reconstruction process 1300 housing units that were destroyed during previous aggressions and have not been reconstructed yet.



Suffering of Families whose houses were destroyed in the aggression

According to statistics by Palestinian human rights organizations, 38,020 citizens, including 10,218 women and 17,444 children, are suffering due to the non-reconstruction of their houses that were destroyed during IOF's aggression on the Gaza Strip last May. These families live in harsh living condition without adequate housing for the fifth month consecutively as they cannot afford rent payments for temporary housing units and suffer from deteriorating living conditions in light of Gaza Strip's aggravating economic situation. Also, these families cannot adapt with/ accommodate to the temporary housing units, which are inadequate in terms of the residents' access to basic services, particularly lack of easy access to education or medical treatment. In addition, hundreds of families are dispersed in temporary and faraway housing units after they were all gathered in nearby residential buildings.

According to PCHR's follow-up, hundreds of families, who lost their houses during IOF's aggression on the Gaza Strip, are facing deteriorating living conditions as these families not only cannot afford rent payments for the temporary housing units but also are unable of enjoying their basic needs, such as food, clothing, education, and health.

Sabri 'Abdel Hakeem Sabri al-Hasanat (23), who lived on al-Nakheel street in Deir al-Balah, said to PCHR's fieldworker that:

“On Wednesday, 19 May 2021, IOF's warplanes targeted and destroyed my house turning it into rubble. We stayed for 2 days at our relatives', and after the aggression, we rented an apartment on the fifth floor that is not suitable for my family, particularly my old mother. Although we registered the damages at the Ministry of Housing, none has contacted us about the reconstruction of our house or removing the rubble. Also, none of the competent authorities has giving us any money to pay for the temporary house rent. Before the aggression, I got engaged and built an apartment as well as fully furnishing; however, it was destroyed, and due to the financial conditions exacerbated by the aggression, I cannot get married. I postponed my marriage till further notice after it was supposed to be in June 2021. We suffer from exceedingly difficult financial conditions after our house was destroyed along with the stores we used to rent and profit from in spending on the basic needs. I pay off the debts of building my apartment that was destroyed during the aggression as I should monthly pay to a construction company 1500 shekels of a total amount of 12,000 shekels. I still pay these installments despite all the damage incurred. Also, my mother suffers chronic diseases, so we borrow money to buy her medicines as we cannot afford paying for them due to the deteriorating financial conditions.”

Many families also suffer from being dispersed in temporary and faraway housing units after they used to be in neighboring buildings. Most families in Gaza are used to living in one building or neighboring buildings, rendering tens of families who lost their houses in the aggression unable to cope with the new situation and forced to stay in distant houses or inadequate housing units until their destroyed houses are reconstructed.

Majed Hamed Bakir al-Yaziji (62), a father of 3 sons and 4 daughters and living on al-Nafaq Street in Gaza City, said to PCHR's fieldworker:

“On 12 May 2021, during the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, my -600sqm house was bombed; it was comprised of 2 residential floors and a ground floor used as a factory for electric tools and panelboards. As a result, the house was destroyed, and the family was separated: I live now in my sister's house, my wife lives at her family's, my daughters-in-law lives at their families' and my daughter, who lived with us in that destroyed building, went with her husband and children to her father-in-law's house.”

The impact of the Israeli aggression was not only limited to forcing these families to live in distant places but also extended to exhausting them financially as they try to compensate what they lost; therefore, increasing their suffering.

Naser Sobhi Ahmed al-‘Attar (45), a father of 3 sons and 3 daughters and living in al-Sha’outh refugee camp in Rafah City, said to PCHR’s fieldworker:

“On 19 May 2021, during the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, our house, which sheltered 3 families of 20 members in 3 housing units. We were not warned and only had one minute and a half to leave. We rushed out of the house, so we did not take any belongings or necessary papers. After our house was destroyed, we moved to live in my sister’s house, where we stayed for 10 days. Afterwards, we were separated in different area: my family and I rented a house near the destroyed house while my brother rented an apartment in Yebna and my son rent an apartment in Barbarah area. After the aggression, we suffered a lot to cope with the new life; we had to borrow money from relatives and friend to pay for the rent and buy the basic needs, including clothes and new household essentials, as we lost them in our destroyed house. Until now, no party has helped me pay the rent or buy essentials, so I am facing accumulating debt of 4000 dollars so far.”

Also, dozens of Palestinians families whose houses were destroyed by the Israeli aggression were unable to have another adequate housing as the temporary houses they obtained do not meet their needs or they were unable to rent one. This has negatively affected their conditions and aggravated their suffering caused by the destruction of their houses.

Hundreds of families, who still live in temporary housing units due to the non-reconstruction of their houses that were destroyed during the 2014 offensive, suffer from not being able to fit in these units that do not meet their needs, including uneasy access to education and treatment

Mohammed Jamal Mohammed Herzallah (31), from al-Remal neighborhood in Gaza City, said to PCHR’s fieldworker:

“On 18 May 2021, Kuhail building, which is adjacent to my house, was targeted with several missiles, causing severe damage to my house, and rendering it uninhabitable after big part of Kuhail building collapsed on my house. My house is comprised of 2 floors; the ground floor housed a bookshop of my own and an apartment sheltering my parents, 2 of my brothers and my sister, while I live on the second floor with my pregnant wife. We stayed 9 days in our house as we faced many troubles while searching for a new one. Around 30 persons refused to rent us fearing that IOF would target the house. After a while, we found an apartment and had to rent it although it was not adequate for us.

The new house is far away from where we lived, and we have a difficulty accessing the basic services that used to be only minutes away. Also, the rented apartment was on the fourth floor in a building, where the elevator is broken, and my father can hardly go up and down stairs. Also, I lost my only source of income when I lost my bookshop. We suffer from poor economic conditions.”

Many families were forced to seek refuge at UNRWA schools and were not able to leave when the aggression ended because their houses were destroyed, and they could not find temporary housing units.

Mohammed Ramadan ‘Ali Saleh (48), a father of 5 and living in Jabalia refugee camp, said to PCHR’s fieldworker that:

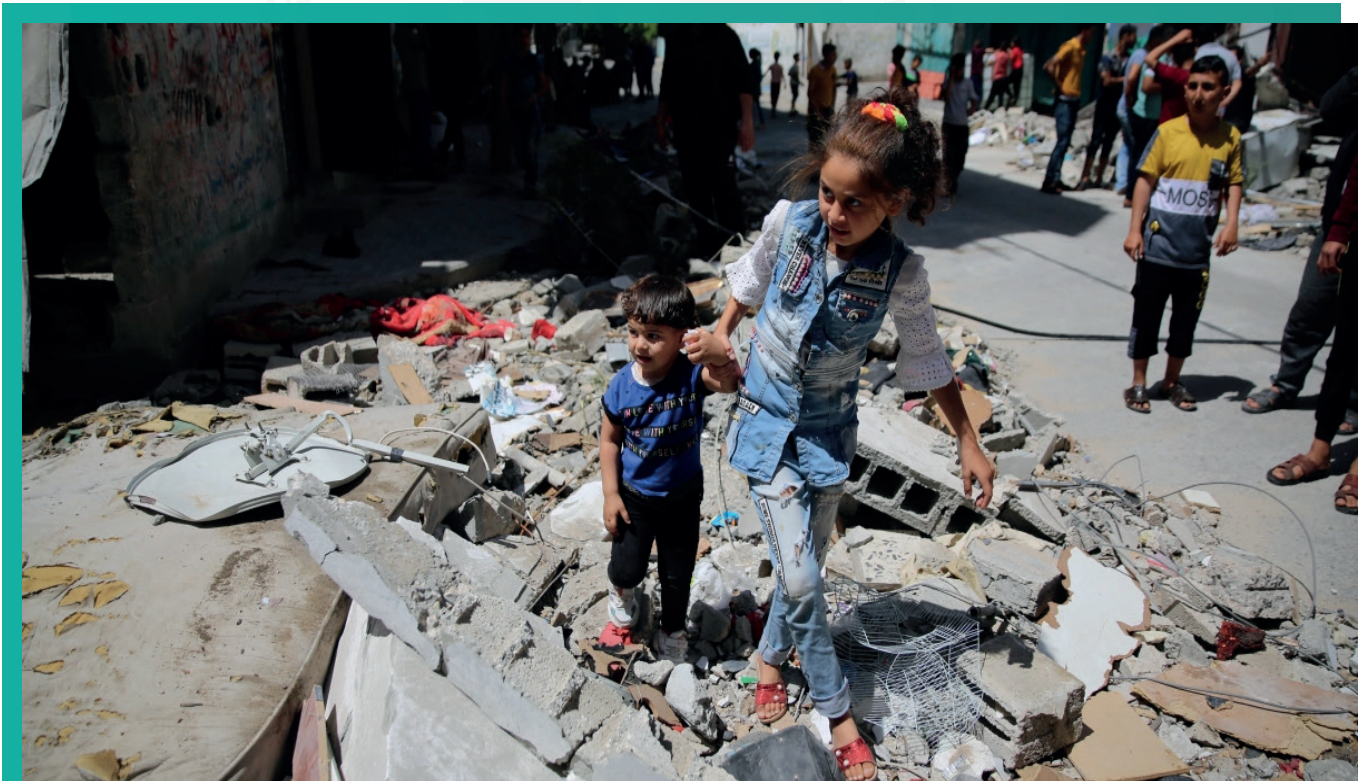
“On 18 May 2021, our house, which sheltered 4 families of 24 individuals, was targeted and completely destroyed by the IOF’s warplanes. As a result, we went to our in-laws’ houses. After the aggression ended, we went with our families to UNRWA schools and stayed there for 36 days until 27 June 2021. We signed contracts with UNRWA that we would leave schools in return for paying us 1500 dollars to rent a house for 6 months and another 500 to buy furniture. Since my house was destroyed, I tried to search for an apartment to rent and shelter me and my family, but I could not until now find a proper one. And if I found one and the owner knew my house was targeted by the IOF’s warplanes, he would refuse and apologize for renting me, fearing that IOF will target his house if I rent it. I live now in a -40sqm house comprised of 2 rooms until I can find an adequate house. After our house was destroyed, the four families, who used to live in one house, are separated now and we live far away from each other in inadequate houses. Also, my financial conditions deteriorated, and I had to borrow 1300 dollars so far to fulfil my family’s basic needs.”

Destruction of houses was not only limited to financial losses but inflicted major psychological harm to the families who lived in those houses. Losing your house is losing security and safety and make you feel you are haunted and targeted, enticing constant fear that you might get hurt when you are not home as your house is your safe place. Also, the physiological damage incurred to those people is not limited to the moment the attack occurred but also extended to periods following the attack on these houses.

Dr. Sami ‘Aweidah, a psychologist at Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, said that the Israeli occupation understands that psychological warfare is an integral part of its military aggression on the Palestinians, aiming at inflicting the utmost harm possible to their psyche like they do to their economy and infrastructure. The occupation depends on experts who know very well the psychological impact of destroying houses and how it entices fear and panic among civilians.

'Aweidah added house in its structure is a place of refuge, safety, and comfort, where each individual has his own space and can figure out his identity and integrity. Thus, targeting the source of safety brings feelings of helplessness and fear among the residents. The occupation authorities mainly target houses to create a Palestinian human who is helpless and incapable of carrying on his life and steadfastness. Fear sneaked into each Palestinian house during the last aggression, fearing they will be targeted since no safe place is left in the Gaza Strip and each area is under threat: a formula the occupation has sought to inculcate in minds of people living in the Gaz Strip.

'Aweidah emphasized that targeting houses has a near-term impact on the residents as they will endure feelings of fear and panic as well as acute post-traumatic disorders. However, after a while, other symptoms will appear and may amount to stress and anxiety disorders, including developing physical or mental symptoms.





House Demolition Policy under International law

IOF committed war crimes against civilians in the Gaza Strip during the 2021 aggression in light of the international community silence and Israeli occupation's impunity that has encouraged it to continue with its aggression and commission of further crimes in the Gaza Strip; meanwhile, the latter still suffers from the consequences of previous aggressions and the closure imposed for 15 years.

The international humanitarian law provides that civilian buildings and property shall not be the object of attack by the occupying power and are entitled full protection. Article (53) of the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Times of War prohibits any destruction of property owned by residents of the occupied territory as it provides that "Any destruction by the Occupying Power of real or personal property belonging individually or collectively to private persons, or to the State, or to other public authorities, or to social or cooperative organizations, is prohibited, except where such destruction is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations."

During their aggression on the Gaza Strip, IOF violated the international humanitarian law principles when they targeted the safe residential neighborhoods and destroyed houses over their residents. IOF destruction of residential towers during the 2021 offensive violates the principles of military necessity, proportionality and distinction between civilian objects and military objectives. These acts fall under the collective penalties and reprisals prohibited against civilians pursuant to Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which provides that "No protected person may be punished for an offence he or she has not personally committed. Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited. Pillage is prohibited. Reprisals against protected persons and their property are prohibited."

IOF's warnings given to civilians either through "roof knocking" using warning missiles, phone calls or leaflets urging civilians to leave their houses are illegal warnings as the residents are not given the enough time to leave; moreover, IOF will not in any way cancel the attack if the residents refused to obey the orders and decided to stay home, thereby inflicting harm and endangering their lives. IOF use these warnings to circumvent the international law rules to justify their attacks on the civilian objects.

The Israeli-imposed closure on the Gaza Strip and accompanying restrictions on the import of construction materials and therefore denying the residents from rebuilding their destroyed houses contradicts with Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services. Moreover, the Israeli violations and deliberate destruction of housing units deprive thousands of civilians of their right to adequate housing, which contradicts with Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that recognizes the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing, and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The Article also urges States Parties to take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right.



Recommendations

- The High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 ought to take practical steps, in accordance with their legal obligations, to compel the Israeli occupation authorities to lift all forms of its unjust closure, and open all crossings, in order to begin reconstruction and alleviate the suffering of those affected by the war aggression.
- Donor countries must fulfil their pledges to the Gaza reconstruction, as the delay in dispatching these sums hinders reconstruction efforts and increases the suffering of those who lost their homes during the aggression.
- Immediate efforts must be exerted to provide urgent relief programs for shelterless civilians who live in inadequate housing conditions, that is until they return to their homes after they are reconstructed
- Anything that induces fear among donors and causes delays in the reconstruction efforts must be eliminated, most prominently the Israeli closure and continued restrictions on import of reconstruction materials, the continued Palestinian division, and the recurrent Israeli threats of conducting military offensives on the Gaza Strip.