

By Democracy Now

From <http://www.democracynow.org> | Original Article

A new report based on testimonies of Israeli soldiers concludes the massive civilian death toll from last summer's Israeli assault on Gaza resulted from a policy of indiscriminate fire. The Israeli veterans group Breaking the Silence released testimonies of more than 60 Israeli officers and soldiers which it says illustrate a "broad ethical failure" that "comes from the top of the chain of command." More than 2,200 Palestinians were killed in the assault, the vast majority civilians. On Israel's side, 73 people were killed, all but six of them soldiers. During the 50-day operation, more than 20,000 Palestinian homes were destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of people are still displaced. We hear candid video testimonies from the soldiers and speak to former Israeli paratrooper Avner Gvanyahu, director of public outreach at Breaking the Silence.

### Transcript

This is a rush transcript. Copy may not be in its final form.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** We begin today's show with a new report based on testimonies of Israeli soldiers that concludes the massive civilian death toll from last summer's Israeli assault on Gaza resulted from a "policy of indiscriminate fire." The Israeli veterans group Breaking the Silence released testimonies of more than 60 Israeli officers and soldiers, which it says illustrate a, quote, "broad ethical failure" that "comes from the top of the chain of command." More than 2,200 Palestinians were killed in the assault, the vast majority of them civilians. On Israel's side, 73 people were killed, all but six of them soldiers. During the 50-day operation, more than 20,000 Palestinian homes were destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of people are still displaced.

**AMY GOODMAN:** In a video made by Breaking the Silence, a first sergeant in the Israeli military, his voice distorted, describes how a commander told him, "There are no innocent civilians," and to assume anyone within 200 or 400 meters of the Israeli Defense Forces was an enemy. '

**IDF FIRST SERGEANT:** [translated] The commander announced, "Folks, tomorrow we enter. I want you to be determined, task-oriented and confident. The entire nation is behind you"—the usual speeches. And then he spoke about the rules of engagement. And I quote: "The rules of engagement are: Any person at a distance that could put you at risk, you kill him with no need for clearance." Meaning, anyone at a distance of 200, 300, 400 meters from us, isn't an ordinary civilian. According to IDF logic, he must be there for a reason, because an ordinary civilian would flee the area, and so, we must kill him with no need for clearance. For me, it was just spine-tingling. I said to him, "Let me get this straight. Any person I see in the neighborhood where we're headed, I spot him and kill him?" He said, "Yes. Any sane person who sees a tank battalion in his neighborhood will run away. If he sticks around, then he's up to something. And if he's up to something, it's against you. So shoot him." So I tried to dig a little deeper and asked, "What if it's an innocent civilian?" He said, "There are no innocent civilians. Your presumption should be that anyone within the area of battle, 200, 300, 400 meters from you, is your enemy."

**AMY GOODMAN:** That was an Israeli Defense Force, IDF, soldier who served during last summer's Israeli assault on Gaza, known as Operation Protective Edge. His testimony is part of a new report just released by the veterans group Breaking the Silence.

For more, we go to Tel Aviv, Israel, where we're joined by Avner Gvaryahu, director of public outreach at Breaking the Silence. He's a former IDF soldier who served from 2004 to '07 as a sergeant in a special operations unit around Nablus and Jenin.

We welcome you, Avner, to *Democracy Now!* Talk about the number of people who are speaking out and why you have done this now.

**AVNER GVARYAHU:** So, hi, Amy. We're a group, Breaking the Silence, as an organization, a group of former IDF soldiers, and actually some of us are still current IDF

soldiers. Throughout the years, we've met more than a thousand soldiers. And this time around, this summer, when the summer ended, and we realized—we saw the amount of damage, we realized that something went terribly wrong. And we actually started getting phone calls, emails from soldiers who were themselves in this operation. And then we, ourselves, also started reaching out to people. So we're talking about, as you said, more than 60 soldiers. A third of them are officers, which is a very high number for us. And we're talking about people that all served during the summer in different positions, in different units. We're not talking about soldiers from only one specific place, but throughout the entire Strip in different positions. And I think reading these testimonies, it definitely did this to me and to us in the organization, but I think it's very, very clear that something went terribly, terribly wrong. And the bare minimum we can do is listen to the same soldiers we sent to fight in our name.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And, Avner, what penalties are the—in all of these clips, the soldiers are anonymous, their identities are not revealed. What penalties do they face for speaking out? And how did you manage to get so many people to get together to testify in one video?

**AVNER GVARYAHU:** Well, it's actually—it's not an easy task. It's not trivial to speak out in Israel today. It's definitely something that is difficult. And I have to say that the soldiers, who are anonymous—and all the testimonies that are given are given to us, you know, one on one, so we know each and every one of the testifiers, but for various reasons we have decided to make sure all our testifiers will be anonymous. But they're not scared of the penalties. They're not scared of legal repercussions. They're actually scared of the reaction of their society and the fact that they will be seen as the scapegoat. And I think one of the points that we've always tried to make is that the soldiers coming and speaking out are not the problem. The soldiers coming and speaking out, in my eyes, are maybe a way for solution. They're really managing to pinpoint or to put a spotlight on the orders they got from up high. And that's where we're going to try to push the debate, to a larger public debate about the way we fight our wars, the way we fight in Gaza, and maybe try to make sure next time around will—won't be that close or maybe won't happen at all.

**AMY GOODMAN:** In this clip, a first sergeant describes his commander's order to randomly fire on a neighborhood in the Gaza Strip during the assault last summer.

**IDF FIRST SERGEANT:** [translated] So he gave an order: "Guys, park the tanks in a row. Assume position facing the neighborhood of Al-Bureij and prepare for contact." Contact means we all shoot at once, after a countdown—three, two, one, shoot. I remember all the tanks stood in a row, and I personally asked my commander, "Where do we shoot?" He said, "Wherever

you like." Later on, I also heard from the other guys that everyone just chose a target. And he said on the radio, "Good morning, Al-Bureij. Guys, we're going to do a 'Good morning, Al-Bureij.'" This meant waking up the neighborhood to show them that the

IDF

is here and to deter them. I remember how the tanks stood in a row. So did ours. And I, the gunman, looked at some house, a very tall house, in the center of that neighborhood some 2,000 meters away, which is about two kilometers. And I asked my commander, "Where in the house do I aim?" He said, "Aim a little to the right, a little to the left, at that window, at that floor. Three, two, one, shoot." And we all shot shells sporadically, of course. At no point was anyone shooting at us, though.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Again, that soldier, his face is blurred, and his voice is disguised. Our guest is Avner Gvanyahu. He's a first sergeant in the IDF, the person we just heard. So you interviewed, or Breaking the Silence interviewed some, what, 70 officers, soldiers? You have this all on videotape?

**AVNER GVARYAHU:** So, a little bit less than 70 soldiers, many of them officers, were interviewed. Not all are on video. A small number of them was willing to be filmed on video, because of the things I mentioned earlier. I mean, we're talking about a real fear, which I can definitely relate to. But still, they found in them the urge and the need to come and speak out.

This specific clip or testimony was really, as you mentioned, from a soldier who served that was a gunner in the Armored Corps. I think the interesting thing about this testimony is that it's actually not that unique. We hear very similar stories, incidences, from various soldiers in different places. And the stories that keep coming up are the fact that, basically, soldiers were told to, first of all, almost constantly shoot, which is something that is not the procedure. Just in comparison, during the Second Intifada around the year 2000 in the Gaza Strip, in order to shoot—in order for a tank or for a gunner to shoot a tank shell, he actually needed permission from his battalion officer. We're talking in this time around, in this round, soldiers that were very, very young soldiers, sometimes enough—as the tank commander gave these orders. So, basically, soldiers were told almost constantly, "Shoot." And this is something, as we just heard, many times in areas that they were not shot at from, many times to areas they had no idea what they were actually shooting at.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Well, Avner, one soldier said his unit tried to shoot all of its machine gun ammunition just before getting resupplied, even if their targets had not been identified. Let's listen to this one.

**IDF SOLDIER:** [translated] I remember that one time our post was overlooking a valley, and we decided—we knew we were about to have our ammunition reloaded, so we didn't really care how much we use up on the way. We felt that we were supposed to waste as much ammo as possible. So we just started firing the machine gun's entire magazine, which is thousands of bullets' worth of ammo. And we just kept shooting and shooting, almost nonstop, until the barrel was overheated. When it does, it's called a "barrel melt." It changes shape, and it's no longer usable. But we didn't really care, because we knew that no one would ask questions.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** So, Avner Gvaryahu, what did the soldiers say about the rules of engagement that they were told by their officers to utilize in this conflict?

**AVNER GVARYAHU:** Well, you know, I think that's one of the most interesting points: rules of engagement. I mean, as you mentioned, I, myself, was a paratrooper. And I was also a sergeant, a commander of soldiers. And I knew what my rules of engagement were, but they keep them very brief. Basically, one of the things I was taught was, if you have a doubt, then there is no doubt. What does that mean when I was a soldier? What does that mean when I was serving in the West Bank? Basically, think not twice, but at least three or four times, before you shoot, because if there's a little bit of a doubt, then better you do not make a mistake, and basically, don't shoot if there's a doubt.

What we see in the Gaza Strip is basically the army's attempt to eliminate the idea of doubt. Soldiers were told—and this is really throughout the Strip, throughout the board—soldiers were told that the areas that they're entering are areas that there are no civilians. Now, the IDF does warn civilians in the areas soldiers were supposed to enter. Pamphlets were dropped from the air, sometimes phone calls. But the moment that those warnings were given, in the mindset of the military, anyone staying in that area turns into someone that is an enemy. Now, the moment after we throw those pamphlets and make a few phone calls, not to each and every one of the houses, the

IDF

starts bombing artillery shells all over these areas. So soldiers are basically entering an area that they were told—basically, from our perspective, they were lied to—that there are no civilians there.

Now, why am I saying in such certainty they were lied to? Because from our testimonies, we hear over and over again that there were still Palestinians in these neighborhoods. Now, I don't

know why they were there. Some stayed because maybe Hamas members forced them. Maybe that was the case. But in other cases, we know of people that were there because they just couldn't leave—elderly people, people that were handicapped; people that for reasons we don't know—maybe they didn't want to leave their property—stayed. One of the testimonies talks about a soldier entering a house, and there are between 30 and 40 people in it. Right? So when we're talking about the mindset of a soldier, and the testimony we just heard, soldiers were under the false assumption—the false assumption—that they're entering an area that no civilians are in.

**AMY GOODMAN:** In—

**AVNER GVARYAHU:** And one of the powerful testimonies—yeah?

**AMY GOODMAN:** I just wanted to play another clip from an IDF soldier describing how they would shoot freely at houses during the assault on Gaza last summer in order to, quote, "make their presence felt."

**IDF FIRST SERGEANT:** [translated] When we had some time to kill, meaning that we didn't need to cover for an infantry unit or raid a house, when there was really nothing to do, that from time to time a tank must adopt a position—meaning, to drive up to where we can see the area ahead and "make our presence felt," so to speak—to shoot a shell or fire a machine gun to remind the Gazans that we're there and that they must behave. There were many times where we sat in that boiling hot tank, sweating bullets, half-asleep and half-bored, and we'd get a sudden radio call: "Tank 1A, assume the position and fire a shell." Tank 1A would then drive up on some ramp that the bulldozer had created. Then we'd look around and think, "Which house do we want to take down? Let's go with this one." "Can we shoot it?" "Yes." Boom. The person to say yes wasn't a company commander or a battalion commander, not even an officer. It was a tank commander, a sergeant. So that's what we'd do to kill time. We would even take turns with our tanks and just drive up there to shoot.

There's one amusing story that I clearly remember. I drove up on the ramp at around 9:00 a.m. or 10:00 a.m., but I didn't really want to shoot at a house, because it was my first day, and it still felt wrong. I still had a moral problem with it. So my commander told me, "Go ahead. Shoot. Where do you feel like shooting?" I aimed at—I was the gunman, so I'd aim and shoot. So I

aimed at a metal sign with some Arabic writing on it, like "Private farmland, do not enter." And we just shot at that. So we destroyed half of that grove, destroyed his sign and the olive trees, just because we didn't have anything to do. There was also this time when I drove up, saw a house, decided that it bothered me that it was a purple house. So I asked, "Can I shoot it?" "Sure, go ahead." And boom. There was no supervision. Nobody cared. And that's that. Those were our rules of engagement during Operation Protective Edge.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That's an IDF soldier describing what happened last summer, the Israeli assault on Gaza, his role in it, what is known as Operation Protective Edge. Avner, respond to this. Also, I cut you off when you were talking about another testimony.

**AVNER GVARYAHU:** Yeah, so, I just wanted to—you know, we have these specific incidences, but one of the things we hear from many, many soldiers is the mindset that they were in. And one of the guys describes it, I think, very well. He says, "After three weeks in the Gaza Strip, that you shoot at everything that moves—and things that don't move. In a crazy amount of gun power, the good and the bad sort of mix up together, and morality sort of disappears." And then he says, "It sort of becomes like a video game, and it's like really, really cool and real." The truth of the matter is this is something that, I mean, I can resonate to. I didn't serve in the Gaza Strip; I served in the West Bank. But these are things that we hear from soldiers throughout, you know, the decade we've been gathering testimonies.

I think what happened in the Gaza Strip this time around, because of the unbelievable amount of gunfire, then we really see soldiers using this—you know, this ability really indiscriminately. And I have to say, I don't think that it was—I think there is a difference between shooting indiscriminately and shooting intentionally. Maybe the outcome is the same, but there is a difference. I mean, there wasn't an intentional harm to kill innocent Palestinians, but when we talk about the orders they got, when we're talking about the way we used force in Gaza, that's where the problem starts, because soldiers were really told there are no innocent civilians. And this is why we hear and see these testimonies.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Well, in this other testimony, an Israeli soldier described how he was instructed to treat anyone seen looking towards his position as a scout for Hamas or other militant groups to be fired on.

**IDF SOLDIER:** [translated] But when we spotted someone, we couldn't tell if he was a lookout

or just someone we saw near a window, because he lifted his head or was out smoking a cigarette. And sometimes he's far away. You can see him two kilometers away through your sights, but he doesn't even know you're there, so he doesn't hide. You just see him near a window, and he could be a lookout, but you never really know. And our orders were: "You see anyone standing near a window, you shoot."

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And this is an Israeli soldier describing his feelings at the end of the assault on Gaza.

**IDF FIRST SERGEANT:** [translated] My feeling after Operation Protective Edge wasn't so good. I had also lost a friend there, and some friends were wounded, but I mostly felt bad morally speaking. I felt that we shot at houses just because, without even knowing if anyone's there. We shot at cars, at ambulances, doing things I was raised not to do—not to kill the innocent, not to shoot at an ambulance. It's like the Wild West out there, and it was all approved by the commanders. I felt there was something morally rotten in this army if we were authorized to do this, because our first rule is not to kill without reason, and here I was formally told, "Kill anything in your proximity." And I took part in that. I did it, and I regret it. I killed people, most of whom didn't do anything to me—people standing on rooftops, people driving in cars, people in ambulances, people at home. I don't even know where their homes are on the map. And we just did it because. "Why not? Let's fire a shell for fun." It's a really lousy feeling.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And in this final clip, an IDF soldier describes how a battalion commander tried to raise morale by telling the soldiers in his company that Shejaiya had been completely destroyed.

**IDF SOLDIER:** [translated] I don't remember when exactly, but one day the battalion commander gathered the entire battalion. I guess he wanted to give a speech to raise our morale. He knew that many of our friends from the other battalion were in Shejaiya, and so he said, "You don't need to worry anymore. There is no Shejaiya. Shejaiya is gone," like it was wiped off the face of the map. Those were his exact words: "There is no Shejaiya."

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Well, Avner Gvaryahu, what are you hoping to accomplish with these video testimonies now?



**AVNER GVARYAHU:** Well, first and foremost, what we want to hope for is to create debate. We want people to know how we're fighting in Gaza. I think that it's very clear this is, you know, the third round. Everyone knows there's going to be another one. So let's make sure that's what we can hope for, is that before the next cycle starts, let's at least know what we're demanding from our soldiers to do. Now, we're—of course, we could hope for much more. One of the points that we are calling for is an Israeli investigation, but external to the military. We believe that it's crucial and possible for our society to look itself in the mirror and ask itself what they're actually asking their soldier or military to do. And in that matter, it's—like I said earlier, it's not about finding a scapegoat. It's not about a specific commander. It's about, you know, the picture, the whole picture. And I think it's definitely about time that we have a real chance to take responsibility and say that we, as a society, cannot accept the fact that this is the way we're going to continue to live. And I, as an Israeli—I, by the way, see myself as an Israeli patriot. I am not willing to accept the fact that because our enemies act in immoral ways, it's OK for us to not ask ourselves any questions.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Avner Gvaryahu, in our next segment we're going to look at Palestine joining the ICC. Will Breaking the Silence bring these soldiers' testimonies to the International Criminal Court?

**AVNER GVARYAHU:** Well, the answer is no. We have never called for or handed information to external courts or, therefore, to Israeli courts. We're an organization just trying to create awareness. I think—just specifically speaking, I think that there are more relevant places to bring the report. And that's, of course, to the Israeli eye. I think that what we are trying to do is create this report. But the information is out there. It is public. We actually—last time around, around the Goldstone Report, we did not meet with the committee, but the committee did decide to use our information. So the information is out there, but what we call is what I said earlier, and this is really something that we find very important: an Israeli investigation that's external to the military. We believe this is possible and crucial to our society.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Avner Gvaryahu, I want to thank you for being with us, director of public outreach at Breaking the Silence, a former IDF soldier who served from 2004 to '07 as a sergeant in a special operations unit around Nablus and Jenin. This is *Democracy Now!*

When we come back, we go to The Hague, where the International Criminal Court has a new member—Palestine. Stay with us.