Israel targets Palestinian first responders in Occupied West Bank
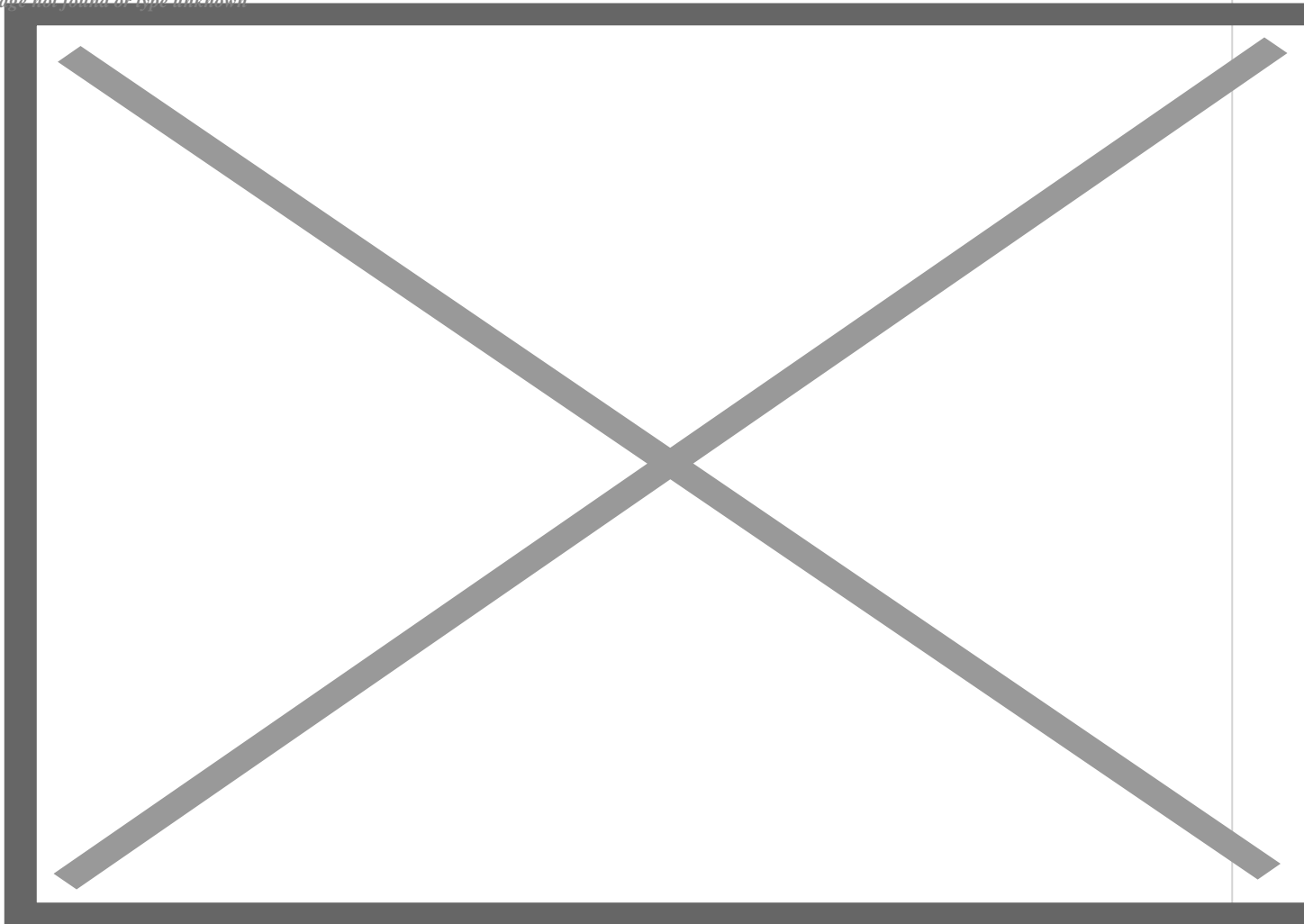

Ramallah, August 21 (RHC)--The latest Israeli raid on the Jenin refugee camp in the northern Occupied West Bank last month has been described as a "massacre" by local officials and residents and condemned by the United Nations, but it is far from unique in scope and brutality.

In a statement published to mark World Humanitarian Day, UN humanitarian coordinator Lynn Hastings said 77 healthcare workers were injured and 30 ambulances damaged while trying to help people in the occupied territory so far in 2023, whether during raids or protests or just on average days.

First responders – non-governmental organisations working with volunteers, doctors, nurses, municipal workers and more – often put their lives at risk while providing help, Hastings said. They are impeded "amid Israel's occupation, movement restrictions, political divisions, recurrent conflict, and even efforts to denigrate their work", Hastings said.

Countless testimonies from first responders on the ground over the years have documented Israel's deliberate practices in targeting first responders that show no signs of stopping.

Omar Azzam, international humanitarian law coordinator at the Palestine Red Crescent Society, told Al Jazeera there were 193 violations by Israeli forces against its medical staff in the occupied West Bank to date in 2023. These, he said, included direct attacks in the field, attacks on ambulances, denying and obstructing access, and targeting the wounded and the sick.

"In July alone, 10 direct attacks were recorded against medical staff, from gas and live fire, the last of which happened to a field volunteer in the Askar camp while providing treatment," Azzam said. "He wore a badge but he was shot in the foot, which means it was intentional."

In Jerusalem, Azzam's team recorded 314 cases of first responders being prevented from driving to a location or being forced to change vehicles without consideration for the patients' safety up to the end of June.

They also reported 80 cases of paramedics being denied complete access to the wounded by Israeli forces and 41 cases of being delayed or obstructed. Moreover, nine patients were kidnapped while receiving medical treatment, something that happens even inside ambulances.

Hamza Abu Hajar, a volunteer at the Palestinian Medical Relief Society in Nablus, has paid a high price over the six years he has been providing assistance. The 27-year-old told Al Jazeera he was shot in the chest with live ammunition during an Israeli raid in Nablus last December, which left him fighting for his life in intensive care for several days.

"Eight months after the injury, I'm still suffering complications from the bullets that entered my chest and [went] out through my back," he said. "Over the years, I've been subjected to many attacks by occupation forces, including when they shoot bullets, tear gas and sound bombs to prevent me from reaching the wounded, or even when occupation patrols attack me."

EMS workers and volunteers loading an injured man into an ambulance at the site of protests
Healthcare workers often risk their lives to reach those in need [Ayman Nobani/Al Jazeera]
Amir Ahmad Amir, a volunteer at the Red Crescent in Nablus, was shot by Israeli forces last month.

The 25-year-old, who became a father three months ago, was at the Askar refugee camp in Nablus trying to provide medical assistance to a child when he was shot three times in both legs by Israeli snipers.

"I crawled on the ground to try to get to a wall, but the bullets were being fired at me, directly and deliberately. Some of them shot through the shoes I was wearing," he told Al Jazeera from a hospital, where he will undergo an operation for nerve damage.

Israel said after the July operation in Jenin it "ensures that humanitarian assistance is provided and does not apply any limitation on access for medical staff, except in places where the lives of medical staff is at risk due to exchanges of fire".

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