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Benjamin Netanyahu Threatens Shoot-To-Kill Crackdown on Stone-Throwers

Jeffrey Heller

September 2, 2015

Israel is considering giving its security forces a freer hand to shoot at young Palestinian stone-throwers, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said on Wednesday.

Under standing orders, Israeli soldiers facing violent Palestinian protests can open fire with live bullets only in life-threatening situations. That effectively bans firing at Palestinians who flee after hurling a rock or petrol bomb.

But after meeting with several cabinet ministers and security chiefs to discuss an increase in stone-throwing in Jerusalem and on a highway in the occupied West Bank, Netanyahu suggested the rules could be hardened.

“Since the justice system finds it difficult to deal with minors who throw rocks, changes to orders on opening fire towards stone- and petrol bomb-throwers will be examined,” the prime minister’s office said in a statement.

Netanyahu was quoted as saying at the session that his government’s policy was one of “zero tolerance towards stone-throwing and zero tolerance towards terror.”

Wasel Abu Youssef, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization’s Executive Committee, criticized the potential new policy.

“This rightist Israeli fanatic government is pursuing its criminal policy to kill Palestinians. The new regulations would mean more escalation, killings and crimes against our people” he told Reuters.

Israeli-Palestinian peace talks have been frozen since 2014 and while violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has not approached the levels of past Palestinian uprisings, there has been a surge of Palestinian stone-throwing, long a symbol of resistance to Israeli occupation.

While tougher action against Palestinian stone-throwers would likely draw international concern, Netanyahu’s government and the military have been facing calls from Israeli settler leaders in the West Bank for a security crackdown.

Those demands mounted after a video last week that showed a masked Israeli soldier being hit and bitten by relatives of a Palestinian boy - a suspected rock-thrower whom he had placed in a headlock. On Israeli social media, many asked why the infantryman had not fought back or even used his assault rifle.

In July, Israel’s parliament imposed tougher penalties of up to 20 years in prison for people throwing rocks at vehicles, after a wave of Palestinian protests in occupied East Jerusalem.

But no such punishments have been reported since the new legislation was approved, and the measure does not apply to the occupied West Bank, where Israeli military law is in effect and stone-throwing.

The Israeli human rights group B'Tselem lists 12 Palestinian minors who were shot and killed by Israeli forces during protests and clashes in the West Bank in 2014. In at least four of those incidents, Israel said the youngsters had been throwing rocks or petrol bombs, according to B'Tselem.

Since 2011, three Israelis, including a baby and a girl, have been killed in the West Bank after rocks were thrown at vehicles they were traveling in.