

## **NYT on Hezbollah and Israeli Attacks On Civilians**

Written by

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#### **PEJ News - Earth Whose Human Rights Matter?**

WASHINGTON - September 11 - When Human Rights Watch recently released two investigations of the 2006 Israel/Lebanon war, the New York Times found the group's documentation of unlawful attacks against Israel to be far more newsworthy than unlawful attacks committed by Israel.

It's rare that a media outlet's news standards can be tested so directly. The human rights group released separate reports on violations by both Hezbollah and Israel, charging each side with indiscriminate attacks on civilians. When the first report was released, the Times placed an 800-word story (8/31/07) under the headline "Rights Group Accuses Hezbollah of Indiscriminate Attacks on Civilians in Israel War," and accompanied by a photo of Israeli civilians at risk from Hezbollah rockets.

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But when Human Rights Watch's focus turned to Israeli actions, the paper's interest declined considerably; it ran a brief Associated Press report (9/7/07), sans photo, totaling 139 words. The headline: "Israel Criticized Over Lebanon Deaths."

In terms of sheer news value, it would be difficult to argue that the first report was more important than the second. Hezbollah's tactics were loudly criticized throughout the media during and immediately after the war, with few if any media defenders; thus, a report documenting those infractions would be familiar territory for most readers.

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In contrast, Human Rights Watch's report on Israeli infractions offered new information to the media debate, undercutting a key argument that Israel's supporters have made about civilian casualties in Lebanon--that they resulted from Hezbollah's use of the Lebanese population as human shields. Human Rights Watch found no evidence for these oft-repeated claims; as the group's executive director Kenneth Roth was quoted on Democracy Now! (9/6/07), "The Israeli government's claim that civilian deaths in southern Lebanon were due mainly to Hezbollah hiding behind civilians is false."

The Times' news judgment also fails to reflect the civilian death toll on each side. Human Rights Watch estimated that Israel killed about 900 Lebanese civilians, out of about 1,200 total Lebanese deaths, while Hezbollah killed 43 Israeli civilians along with about 80 Israeli military personnel. It is difficult, then, to avoid the conclusion that Israeli lives are considered significantly more important by the Times than Lebanese lives.

This is not the first time the paper has provided cover for Israeli actions in Lebanon. As FAIR noted last year (Action Alert, 12/6/06), the Times placed an account of a leaked Israeli research group's report on its front page. According to this report, Israeli attacks on Lebanese civilians were legitimate, "since Hezbollah fired from civilian areas, itself a war crime, which made those areas legitimate targets."

The Human Rights Watch investigation directly refutes this argument. It is revealing that the Times would grant this investigation so little attention, given their interest in detailing Hezbollah's violations.

**ACTION:** Ask New York Times public editor Clark Hoyt to investigate why the Times considered the Human Rights Watch report on Hezbollah's military tactics much more newsworthy than the group's similar investigation of Israeli actions.

### CONTACT:

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Clark Hoyt

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