

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel ▪ Bimkom ▪ B'Tselem ▪ Gisha ▪ HaMoked: Center for the Defense of the Individual ▪ The Public Committee Against Torture ▪ Yesh Din ▪ Adalah ▪ Physicians for Human Rights-Israel ▪ Rabbis for Human Rights

August 2, 2009

To:
Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu
Minister of Defense Ehud Barak
Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman

In reference to: **The aggressive repression of the organization "Breaking the Silence" by the Foreign Ministry and other governmental agents**

We, organizations and associations for social change working within Israeli civil society, protest the Israeli government's aggressive attempts to harm "Breaking the Silence."

"Breaking the Silence" has gained a reputation as a credible Israeli organization that gathers soldiers' testimonies and documents events in which international and Israeli norms of warfare have been violated. Most of the organization's activists have served as soldiers in the Occupied Territories and therefore have personally experienced the way in which orders and regulations may lead to forbidden actions. The organization conducts thorough, well-researched investigations, as it did when preparing the report on Operation Cast Lead.

Unfortunately, instead of living up to the challenge set by this report, initiating a real public debate about the significance of the testimonies and holding a thorough investigation of the matter, those in power in the military and government preferred to wage a frontal assault on the organization through the publication of baseless accusations meant to challenge the authenticity of the organization and the report's findings.

This approach matches Israel's ongoing policy of concealing information from the public regarding suspicions of human rights violations during the fighting in Gaza. As part of this policy, Israel prohibited Israeli journalists from entering Gaza, prohibited Israeli and international human rights organizations from entering Gaza, refused to cooperate with international investigative bodies, concealed the names of senior army officers, and now, is also working against whoever releases information about the events that contradicts the official Israeli version.

Indeed, the soldiers' testimonies published by "Breaking the Silence" do not tell the "official" story that the government of Israel wants to tell the public. They place a large question mark over the 'most moral army in the world' image. They call on the Israel public to leave behind its illusions and participate in a meaningful discussion about the character of the society in which they live.

The aggressive pressure used by the Foreign Ministry and other governmental agents in order to silence 'Breaking the Silence' is dangerous and troubling.

The health and proper functioning of a democracy are expressed in, among other things, the legitimacy it grants to organizations who criticize the authorities. The activity of such organizations strengthens democracy and is essential to it. In a democratic state, it is not appropriate for the government to use its authority and power to convey threatening messages in order to silence dissent. This behavior of the Foreign Ministry and other governmental agents is anti-democratic and reminiscent of oppressive regimes.

We, organizations working within Israeli civil society, demand that the government of Israel cease all activity meant to instill fear and silence or harm vital organizations that operate legitimately, and allow them to engage freely in public discourse and various activities.

We call upon the government to participate and contribute to the initiation of a public debate about the issues raised in the document released by "Breaking the Silence," and to deal with the content of the testimonies in a meaningful way.