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Israeli Settlers Attack Palestinians and Washington Post Journalist in West Bank

In the latest surge of violence, settlers targeted Palestinians during the olive harvest, a cultural touchstone and economic lifeline in the Israeli-occupied area.

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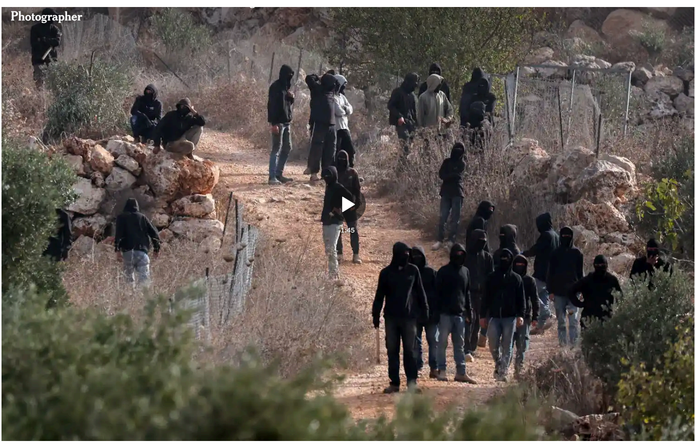

Masked Israeli settlers attacked Palestinians and beat the American journalist Heidi Levine as they stormed an olive grove during the annual harvest in the Israeli-occupied West Bank Ammar Awad/Reuters

By **Azam Ahmed**
Azam Ahmed reported from the village of Khirbet Abu Falah where he and a team from The New York Times witnessed the violence.

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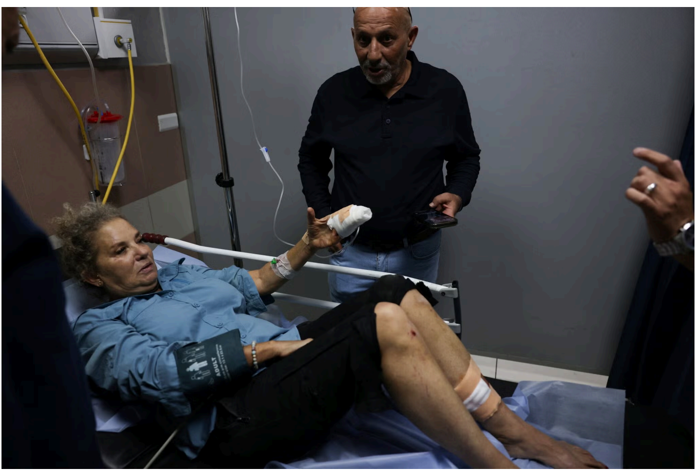
Dozens of masked Israeli settlers on Friday attacked a group of Palestinians while they were picking olives in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, seriously injuring several people, including a veteran Washington Post photographer covering the harvest.

Shortly after 8 a.m. during the start of the harvest, the settlers, dressed in black, descended on the village of Khirbet Abu Falah, a small hamlet of fewer than 6,000 people northeast of Jerusalem, according to residents and the mayor.

A team of New York Times journalists arrived on the scene around 9:30 a.m. and witnessed the attack. Armed with slingshots and batons, the settlers launched heavy stones at the Palestinians and set trees ablaze, sending dense columns of smoke into the sky and prompting residents to flee. At least one settler carried a firearm.

Panic ensued as the settlers pressed closer and some young residents squared off with them, trying to defend their neighbors.

Videos of the attack, which were verified by The Times, show that the photographer, Heidi Levine, 63, who was wearing body armor with large press tags, was trapped behind the settlers. They began to beat her with bats and sticks, kicking her as she was prostrate on the ground, according to the videos.



Heidi Levine, an American photographer working for The Washington Post, in the emergency room of a hospital in Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, on Friday. Ahmad Gharabli/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

We saw Israeli military forces arrive amid the ongoing attacks and begin pressing residents back from the olive fields, which stretch across several acres along the outskirts of the village. They fired dozens of rounds of tear gas. The sound of live fire rang out.

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Medics from neighboring communities raced into the swarm to rescue the injured as tear gas filled the area, where dozens of other journalists and activists had gathered.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said three Palestinians were also wounded. Ms. Levine was transported to a hospital in the area of Ramallah, a city in the West Bank. "While we are relieved that Heidi has received medical care and is safe, we are outraged by this unwarranted attack on a journalist doing her job," The Post said in a statement.

Doctors have said Ms. Levine has a broken rib and lacerations on her legs, rear end and hip, as well as a serious cut on her left hand, according to Michael Milner, her son.

The Israeli military said soldiers and border police officers were dispatched to the area of Khirbet Abu Falah after receiving a report of a confrontation. It said that a female foreign journalist was injured, adding that all circumstances surrounding the incident would be examined.

Palestinians running away after Israeli soldiers fired multiple rounds of tear gas. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

"Attacks and violence against innocent civilians are grave and unacceptable acts that require a coordinated, multi-agency response," the military said.

The office of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel said in a statement in English: "The facts surrounding the confrontation near Abu Falah, during which Washington Post photojournalist Heidi Levine was allegedly assaulted, remain unclear and are under investigation."

Since the Hamas-led attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, settlers have intensified their attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank, a campaign of violence that has emptied out entire villages and instilled fear in communities. In recent weeks, their assaults have focused on the olive harvest, a cultural touchstone in the West Bank, with hundreds of villages relying on it as both a communal rite and economic lifeline.

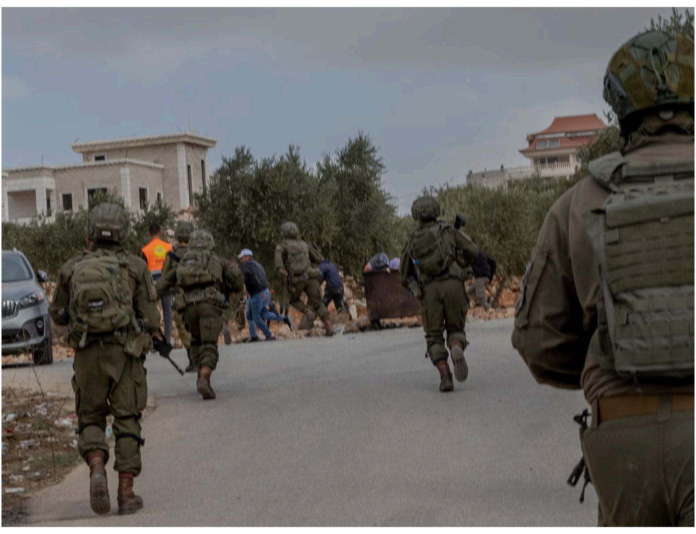
Yesh Din, an Israeli human rights group that monitors settler violence, said it has documented 82 violent incidents against harvesters, 135 instances of crop theft, and 39 of damage to or destruction of trees.

A Red Crescent medic reacting to tear gas that was fired by Israeli soldiers. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

The village of Abu Falah has been subjected to several settler attacks in recent weeks, according to the mayor, Nazem Saleh Shuman. In one incident last week, he said, settlers burned three cars.

“This is our land, we were born here, our ancestors come from here, and we’ve lived here all our lives,” he said. “We believe in this place and we take care of it. We have nowhere else to go.”

In the chaos after Friday’s attack began, we saw several men race past a group of Israeli soldiers right near us. The soldiers then chased the men, including a member of a local council, Abed Aljaber Obied, who had a hand-sized red garden tool in his back pocket. Our photographer took a picture of him running away from the soldiers.

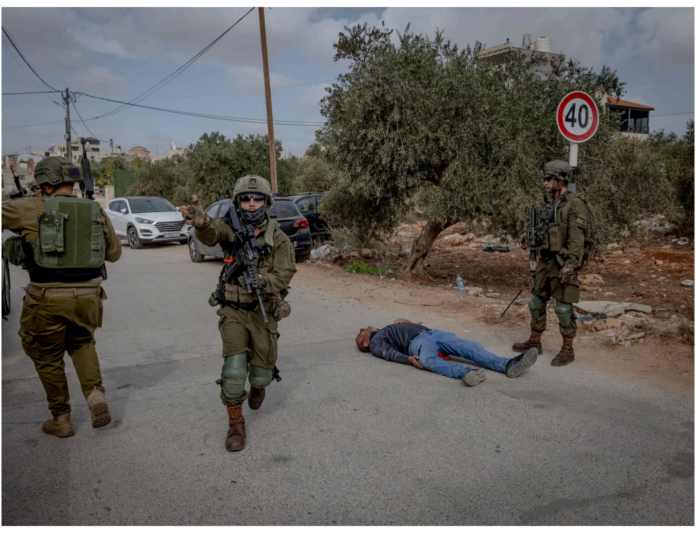


Abed Aljaber Obied, center, wearing a white cap, running away from Israeli soldiers. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

We raced after them and heard rounds being fired. Moments later, we saw the man lying wounded on his back, bleeding, the plastic garden tool beneath him.

The mayor identified the man as Mr. Obied, adding that he had been injured by the military.

The military in its statement said it acted to break up the confrontation upon arriving at the scene and “fired warning shots into the air and subsequently toward a suspect who ran toward them carrying a sharp object and posed a threat to them.” The military did not identify the subject.



Israeli soldiers gesturing to journalists after chasing down and shooting Mr. Obied in the leg on Friday. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

People crowded around to check Mr. Obied’s condition. The soldiers pushed them away, while another placed a tourniquet around his leg. A third soldier screamed at the injured man to present his identification, and warned that he would not let the medics take him if he did not.

The military eventually let him go, and he was in stable condition.

After the ambulance left with Mr. Obied, the soldiers remained on the scene. An armored truck with a multi-barrel tear gas launcher attached to its roof fired dozens of rounds, leaving the crowd heaving.

“This place became unlivable,” the mayor, Mr. Shuman, said after the attacks. “This is a residential place, where the people live next to their fields, next to their land.”

“But it’s become a hell for us,” he added.

Palestinian farmers running as Israeli soldiers fired multiple rounds of tear gas into the olive groves in Abu Falah. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

Adam Rasgon, Aaron Boxerman, James McManagan and Aric Toler contributed reporting.

Azam Ahmed is international investigative correspondent for The Times. He has reported on Wall Street scandals, the War in Afghanistan and violence and corruption in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean.

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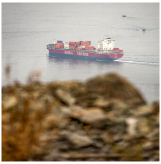

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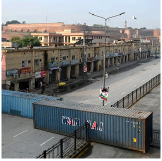

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