

## INTERNATIONAL

# Lawsuits Related to the Intifada Get Costly for Israel's Government

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TEL AVIV — For most Israelis and Palestinians, the cost of five years of the Palestinian intifada, or uprising, will never be known. But the price is clear for the family of Lulu Mahmoud Ahmad Abu Dahi: more than five million shekels (\$1.9 million).

That's the sum the family seeks in a lawsuit against Israel's Ministry of Defense for damages caused by a plastic bullet that hit Lulu, then seven years old, as she played with other girls in 1989 outside her home in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip.

The family contends that an Israeli soldier opened fire on the girls. Lulu suffered extensive brain damage. Despite two operations, she can't hear, speak or feed herself. The suit seeks compensation for the girl's emotional suffering, her loss of future earnings, and funding for medical care for the rest of her life.

## Lawsuits Are Rising

Lulu's case is one of a growing number of lawsuits against the Defense Ministry for intifada-related injuries. The Defense Ministry refuses to divulge the number of pending cases, but one official estimates that "hundreds" of suits are filed every year and that millions of shekels have been paid as compensation. "These types of lawsuits are becoming a serious financial problem for the Defense Ministry," says Naomi Stern, Tel Aviv district attorney in charge of civil cases. "The number of cases keeps growing every year."

The Israeli government takes the cases seriously. State lawyers are considering tightening rules to make filing such suits more difficult. "We've already gone over-budget paying settlements and damages on these claims and had to go back to the Finance Ministry for more money," an official says.

Jahed Ganam, now 25, was opening up his falafel stand in the West Bank city of Hebron when, he says, Israeli soldiers ordered him to take down a Palestinian flag that had been hung from a high-voltage electrical wire above the building. He went up to the roof and tried to knock the flag down with an iron pole. He received a severe electric shock and both of his hands had to be amputated. Last year, an Israeli court awarded him one million shekels in damages, ruling that the soldiers should have explained the hazard. The state is appealing the decision.

## Sending a Political Message

"We are trying to make a political statement with these lawsuits," says Neve Gordon, a member of the Gaza Team, an Israeli human rights group that works in the Gaza Strip collecting evidence for Palestinian legal claims against the government. "Israeli tax money is being used to pay damages. We want Israelis to understand that, whatever their political out-

look, the occupation is hurting us financially and it's not worth it."

Last year, Samir Sharvana received a 22,000-shekel settlement after being shot in the leg three times by a soldier serving in a special undercover unit. Mr. Sharvana says he pulled out a knife when soldiers dressed in Arab dress pulled up to the parking lot where he worked, thinking they were thieves. When he tried to run away, he says a soldier shot him without ordering him to halt or first shooting in the air, as Israeli regulations require.

Dan Assan, a lawyer with Amnon Zichroni Law Offices in Tel Aviv, says his office will only represent people who contend they were innocent bystanders. "The army is required to follow certain rules when breaking up a demonstration, and technically we could also file lawsuits for people who are injured by soldiers who disobey open-fire regulations," says Mr. Assan, whose office has filed 10 suits seeking more than 18 million shekels in damages and is preparing 20 more. "But we decided to file suits only in cases of people who weren't throwing rocks at soldiers or involved in a demonstration. These are people who have no connection to anti-Israeli activity."

Ms. Stern, the district attorney, says most suits aren't filed until years after the alleged event occurred, and that only, in rare cases is there evidence such as a bullet, eyewitness testimony, or hospital records to back up or refute the claims.

"No one ever admits that they threw a rock or were at a demonstration. Instead they say that they were at home, at the supermarket, or going to the mosque when for no reason at all, a soldier suddenly shot them, something we believe happens in only a very, very small number of cases," says Ms. Stern. ". . . We have the feeling that many Palestinians are taking advantage of the fact that there's no way for us to prove or disprove their claims."

Under Israeli law, personal-injury suits may be filed up to seven years from the time of the incident. In cases involving children, the seven-year limit doesn't begin until the age of 18. Says Ms. Stern, "Twenty years from now, we may find ourselves still dealing with the legal consequences of the intifada."

## Arjo Wiggins' Outlook

LONDON — Cob Stenham, chairman of Anglo-French paper group Arjo Wiggins Appleton PLC, said he remained pessimistic about the outlook for the paper industry as a whole, but said his company was well placed to prosper once recovery was under way.

Speaking at the company's annual meeting, Mr. Stenham said a number of cost-cutting measures planned for 1993 will help put the company on a stronger footing. These measures include a project to close plants in France and Germany and plans to cut the work force in Belgium.