

Criticism of Israel's war crimes mounts

'We are very violent', says Israeli commander

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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NAZARETH. Criticism by international watchdog groups over the increasing death toll in Gaza mounted this week as the first legal actions inside Israel were launched accusing the army of intentionally harming the enclave's civilian population.

The petitions – over attacks on medical personnel and the shelling of United Nations schools in Gaza – follow statements by senior Israeli commanders that they have been using heavy firepower to protect soldiers during their advance on built-up areas. “We are very violent,” one told Israeli media.

There is also growing evidence that Israeli forces have been firing phosphorus shells over densely populated areas in a move that risks violating international law by inflicting burns on civilians.

The Palestinian prime minister, Salam Fayyad, meanwhile, called the events in Gaza a “new Nakba”, referring to the catastrophe that dispossessed the Palestinians in 1948. The Palestinian Authority revealed that it was planning to seek the prosecution of Israel's leaders for war crimes in the international courts.

The legal challenges follow a wave of Israeli attacks on schools, universities, mosques, hospitals and ambulances in the past few days. The army claims the attacks are justified because the sites are being used by Hamas fighters.

A petition to the Israeli courts was announced on Wednesday by Taleb al Sanaa, an Arab member of the Israeli parliament, over the shelling on Tuesday of a UN school in the Jabaliya refugee camp that killed at least 40 Palestinians sheltering there.

UN officials, noting that they had passed on the school's GPS co-ordinates to Israel and that it was clearly marked with a UN flag, insisted that only civilians had sought refuge at the school. The UN has demanded an investigation.

Mr al Sanaa said the petition would name the prime minister, Ehud Olmert, the foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, and Ehud Barak, the defence minister, as the responsible parties. “Israel needs to decide whether it wants to be a terrorist organisation like Hamas or respect international law,” he said.

A further petition has been launched by eight Israeli human rights groups, demanding that Israel's Supreme Court ban the army from targeting ambulances and medical personnel.

The petition cites a large number of cases in which Israel has fired on ambulances, arguing

that as a result medics have been unable to treat the wounded or transport them to hospital.

Palestinian medics said 21 of their staff have been killed by Israeli fire and many more wounded, according to reports on Al Jazeera TV. The Al Durra hospital in Gaza City was hit on Tuesday, and a day later three mobile clinics run by a Danish charity, DanChurchAid, were destroyed.

The International Committee of the Red Cross dropped its usual diplomatic language this week in denouncing Israel's refusal to allow medical teams to tend the wounded.

During a three-hour pause in the fighting on Wednesday rescuers managed to reach the Zaytoun neighbourhood, south-east of Gaza City, that was extensively bombed at the start of the week.

Four children were found close to starvation alongside 15 bodies, including those of their mothers. Many other civilians were found dead in the area, and others are believed still to be in hiding. Israeli tanks were stationed nearby the destroyed buildings during the whole period.

Pierre Wettach, a Red Cross spokesman, called Israel's delay in allowing a medical evacuation "shocking" and "unacceptable". He added: "The Israeli military must have been aware of the situation but did not assist the wounded."

Physicians for Human Rights in Israel added its voice, criticising the Israeli authorities for repeatedly ignoring requests to move seriously wounded civilians.

The UN suspended its aid operations on Thursday after two of its drivers were killed and others wounded by Israeli fire directed at one of its relief convoys during another three-hour ceasefire.

John Ging, head of the UN relief agency in Gaza, said: "They were co-ordinating their movements with the Israelis, as they always do, only to find themselves being fired at from the ground troops."

Palestinian sources and international observers warned that the death toll among civilians is rising rapidly as Israel's ground invasion pushes deeper into Gaza.

Al Haq, a Palestinian legal rights group, warned that 80 per cent of the more than 750 Palestinians killed in the fighting so far have been civilians. According to figures cited by the World Health Organisation, at least 40 per cent have been children. Another 3,000 Gazans have been wounded.

Israeli commanders were reported in the Israeli media to be unsurprised by the heavy toll on civilians of their latest actions, saying their priority was to protect soldiers.

"For us, being cautious means being aggressive," one told the Haaretz newspaper. "From the minute we entered, we've acted like we're at war. That creates enormous damage on the ground."

The newspaper said the government had taken into account the likely high number of

Palestinian civilian casualties when it approved the ground operation a week ago.

Another soldier, identified as Lt Col Amir, told Israeli TV on Wednesday: "We are very violent. We are not shying away from any method of preventing casualties among our troops."

Among the dubious tactics the army appears to be resorting to is use of white phosphorus shells, which burn intensely on exposure to air creating the firework-type explosions characteristic of Israel's shelling of Gaza.

Although the shells produce dense clouds of smoke to cover military operations, they also cause severe burns on contact with skin.

Photographs of pale blue artillery shells lined up by tanks stationed on the edge of Gaza have been identified as American-made phosphorus munitions. Neil Gibson, a missiles expert for Jane's, told the London Times that the shells were an "improved model" that burned for up to 10 minutes.

Although such shells are allowed when used solely as a smoke screen, they are banned as a chemical weapon if used as an anti-personnel munition. Palestinian and international medics in Gaza have reported large numbers of burns victims with injuries difficult to treat.

Yesterday, Amnesty International also accused Israeli soldiers of using Palestinian civilians as human shields - a charge Israel has repeatedly levelled against Hamas.

Malcolm Smart, a spokesman, said: "Israeli soldiers have entered and taken up positions in a number of Palestinian homes, forcing families to stay in a ground-floor room while they use the rest of their house as a military base and sniper position."

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest book is "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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