

Israel Attacks UN Aid Convoys to Gaza

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The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has suspended operations in Gaza since coming under attack by Israeli military forces on Friday.

A statement from the UNRWA said its temporary suspension “was compelled by incidents in which UNRWA staff, convoys and installations have come under attack.”

The statement said, “On numerous occasions in recent days, humanitarian convoys have come under Israeli fire even though their safe passage through clearly designated routes at specifically agreed times, had been confirmed by the Israeli liaison office.”

The suspension of operations was necessary due to “the nature, severity and frequency of these incidents”.

The suspension includes movement of staff throughout the Gaza Strip and vehicle movement, such as the delivery of aid into the territory. The agency said its presence in Gaza would continue, and that it would “continue to serve displace civilians who seek safety in UNRWA schools. UNRWA’s clinics will also remain open.”

The inability of the UNRWA to deliver relief to the residents of Gaza exacerbates an already critical humanitarian emergency situation. The Gaza Strip has been under siege by Israel since it withdrew military forces and dismantled settlements in 2005. Since that time, Israel has implemented a blockade of the territory, controlling the land, air, and sea, and allowed only minimal amounts of humanitarian supplies into Gaza. It has also engaged in military incursions into Gaza at will. This situation has led some to argue that Israel is still, by any practical interpretation, the occupying power in Gaza under international law, and therefore responsible for the welfare of its civilian population.

Israel’s bombardment of Gaza beginning on December 27 and its subsequent invasion of the territory have greatly worsened the already critical situation. Much of the population in Gaza has no food, water, or electricity. Gaza’s overflowing hospitals are running on generators and have little or no spare fuel, or medical supplies.

“There is no doubt in my mind that we are dealing with a full-blown and major crisis in humanitarian terms,” said Pierre Kraehenbuehl, the director of operations in Geneva for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). “The situation for the people in Gaza is extreme and traumatic.”

John Ging, the head of the UNRWA in Gaza, said, “There are very real shortages of medicine. This hospital has not had electricity for four days. If the generators go down, those in intensive care will die. This is a horrific tragedy here, and it is getting worse by the moment.”

The Israeli attacks on UN aid convoys are in addition to numerous other attacks on UN sites in Gaza. Four UN sites have also come under Israeli attack over the course of the week. Four UN-run schools and a medical center were hit.

On Tuesday, a school run by UNRWA in the Jabaliya refugee camp was shelled by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) in the fourth attack on a UN site, killing more than 40 and wounding dozens more Palestinians who had taken refuge there in an attempt to escape Israel's bombardment.

The IDF claimed that Hamas militants had fired rockets from the school. Mark Regev, spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, said, "Unfortunately, this is not the first time that Hamas has deliberately abused a UN installation."

But UN officials denied the claim.

John Ging said that Hamas had not violated the sanctity of any UN sites in Gaza. He said he was "very confident now that there was no militant activity inside the school nor militants in the school."

"We are completely devastated," Ging also said. "There is nowhere safe in Gaza. Everyone here is terrorized and traumatized."

In a press statement, he emphasized that all UN schools in Gaza were clearly marked and the coordinates of their exact locations had been provided to Israel. He said that "the Israelis have to end their disproportionate and inappropriate use of force in densely populated areas."

Another UNRWA official, Christopher Gunness, said that the agency was "99.9 percent certain there were no militants or military activity in its school."

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called the attacks "totally unacceptable." He added, "After earlier strikes, the Israeli government was warned that its operations were endangering UN compounds. I am deeply dismayed that despite these repeated efforts, today's tragedies have ensued."

Adnan Abu Hasna, a UNRWA spokesman in Gaza, said that the agency had "several times noted to the Israeli sides to avoid targeting our schools that shelter civilians." Yet, "In spite of rising the blue flag of UNRWA on our schools, the Israeli army has been targeting those schools by missiles and tanks shells."

"Neither homes nor UN shelters are safe," said Maxwell Gaylard, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for the Palestinian territories.

UNRWA spokesman Christopher Gunness said on Friday, "In briefings, senior IDF officers conducted for foreign diplomats, they admitted the shelling to which IDF forces in Jabaliya were responding did not originate from the school."

The ICRC issued a press release Thursday saying when Israel finally granted safe passage for ambulances on January 7, their team "found four small children next to their dead mothers in one of the houses. They were too weak to stand up on their own. One man was also found alive, too weak to stand up. In all there were at least 12 corpses lying on mattresses."

While the ICRC rescue team was assisting other survivors in other houses, Israeli soldiers “ordered the rescue team to leave the area” but refused to do so. “Large earth walls erected by the Israeli army had made it impossible to bring ambulances into the neighbourhood,” the ICRC statement added, noting that “the Israeli military failed to meet its obligation under international humanitarian law to care for and evacuate the wounded” and calling the situation “unacceptable.”

“This is a shocking incident,” said ICRC official Pierre Wettach. “The Israeli military must have been aware of the situation but did not assist the wounded. Neither did they make it possible for us or the Palestine Red Crescent to assist the wounded.”

More than 700 Palestinians have been killed in the war, according to the most recent estimates. The UN has estimated that 25 percent of Palestinian deaths have been women and children, with an addition unknown number of men who were also civilians.

Mads Gilbert, a Norwegian doctor working in the Gaza Strip, when asked by a reporter whether Hamas militants were included amongst those arriving at his hospital for treatment, replied, “I’ve seen one military person among the tens of...I mean, hundreds we have seen and treated. So anybody who tries to claim this is sort of a clean war against another army are lying. This is an all out war against the civilian Palestinian population in Gaza.”

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