

Israel used White Phosphorous bombs during War in Lebanon

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Israel has acknowledged for the first time that it attacked Hezbollah targets during the second Lebanon war with phosphorus shells. White phosphorus causes very painful and often lethal chemical burns to those hit by it, and until recently Israel maintained that it only uses such bombs to mark targets or territory.

The announcement that the Israel Defense Forces had used phosphorus bombs in the war in Lebanon was made by Minister Jacob Edery, in charge of government-Knesset relations. He had been queried on the matter by MK Zahava Gal-On (Meretz-Yahad).

“The IDF holds phosphorus munitions in different forms,” Edery said. “The IDF made use of phosphorous shells during the war against Hezbollah in attacks against military targets in open ground.”

Edery also pointed out that international law does not forbid the use of phosphorus and that “the IDF used this type of munitions according to the rules of international law.”

Edery did not specify where and against what types of targets phosphorus munitions were used. During the war several foreign media outlets reported that Lebanese civilians carried injuries characteristic of attacks with phosphorus, a substance that burns when it comes to contact with air. In one CNN report, a casualty with serious burns was seen lying in a South Lebanon hospital.

In another case, Dr. Hussein Hamud al-Shel, who works at Dar al-Amal hospital in Ba'albek, said that he had received three corpses “entirely shriveled with black-green skin,” a phenomenon characteristic of phosphorus injuries.

Lebanon’s President Emile Lahoud also claimed that the IDF made use of phosphorus munitions against civilians in Lebanon.

Phosphorus has been used by armies since World War I. During World War II and Vietnam the U.S. and British armies made extensive use of phosphorus. During recent decades the tendency has been to ban the use of phosphorus munitions against any target, civilian or military, because of the severity of the injuries that the substance causes.

Some experts believe that phosphorus munitions should be termed Chemical Weapons (CW) because of the way the weapons burn and attack the respiratory system. As a CW,

phosphorus would become a clearly illegal weapon.

The International Red Cross is of the opinion that there should be a complete ban on phosphorus being used against human beings and the third protocol of the Geneva Convention on Conventional Weapons restricts the use of "incendiary weapons," with phosphorus considered to be one such weapon.

Israel and the United States are not signatories to the Third Protocol.

In November 2004 the U.S. Army used phosphorus munitions during an offensive in Faluja, Iraq. Burned bodies of civilians hit by the phosphorus munitions were shown by the press, and an international outcry against the practice followed.

Initially the U.S. denied that it had used phosphorus bombs against humans, but then acknowledged that during the assault targets that were neither civilian nor population concentrations were hit with such munitions. Israel also says that the use of "incendiary munitions are not in themselves illegal."

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