

“Children Killed in their Sleep” by Israel: UN Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) Challenges Israel’s Account of Gaza School Massacre

"Children killed in their sleep; this is an affront to all of us, a source of universal shame."

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Global Research, August 01, 2014

[Al-Akhbar](#) 31 July 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [United Nations](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) Commissioner-General Pierre Krahenbuhl inspects the damage at an UNRWA school following an Israeli strike. (Photo: AFP-Mohammed Abed)

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) says it had sent 17 communiqués that included the coordinates of the Abu Hussein UN-run school in the Jabalia refugee camp to the Israelis to avoid bombing it. The last of these warnings was communicated a few hours before the massacre, according to UNRWA. The deadly Israeli air strike on the school prompted the UN agency to break its silence and challenge the Israeli account of what had happened.

Gaza – This the third time that UNRWA schools have been bombed during this war. The first attack did not lead to casualties, as the Israeli occupation army had sent warnings to the Maghazi School in the central Gaza Strip before shelling it.

The second attack turned into a massacre in Beit Hanoun, in the northern Gaza Strip, killing around 15 refugees. At the time, UNRWA was equivocal about the cause of the attack, and relied on the Israeli account that claimed there had been military activity there. But Wednesday’s massacre took place in a refugee camp that does not have enough room for even a single bullet to be fired. The shelling claimed the lives of 17 people and injured dozens, many critically. When the worshippers had finished their prayers at dawn in the mosques of the northern part of the Jabalia refugee camp, and made their way to the shelters at the elementary Abu Hussein School, they did not know they were about to become the victims of a horrific massacre.

In the beginning, the shells were not directed toward the school, but were random and hit houses in the surrounding area. Suddenly, the Israeli artillery decided to target the school directly, destroying the outer gate, two classrooms at the front and center of the school and adjacent toilets, in addition to three homes near the school. It was a bloodbath with body parts everywhere. Injured people, whose arms or legs were blown off, were paralyzed from shock and could not even scream. Even some animals that were near the gate were killed, and their corpses mingled with those of people.

Mohammed Awad, a journalist who lives in the area, rushed to document the incident. He said what he had seen was probably the “worst massacre” he encountered since the start of the war. He told *Al-Akhbar* that he counted up to 15 shells that landed on the school and the street that separates it from surrounding homes, adding, “The strikes were sudden and random. People did not realize what was happening and they could not escape.”

Awad said that members from both the Najjar and Amoudi families were killed in the attack, in addition to the school’s janitor who was on UNRWA’s payroll, adding, “Eight people died in a single classroom.” The journalist also pointed out that fires broke out at the school as a result, and spread to a fuel tank and an electricity generator.

According to Awad, the majority of families that sought shelter in the school came from the farmlands in the north, “fleeing with their carts, horses, and donkeys, the source of their livelihoods.” Awad also stressed that there had been no prior warning issued to the school.

Mohammed Muhanna also witnessed the massacre. He said, “Those who know the area know that it is crowded, and that there is no room to fire rockets from it. The entire area is civilian and the occupation knows it.” Muhanna was among the first to arrive at the scene, and helped transport the injured. He also told *Al-Akhbar* that there were officials from UNRWA who were checking the schools and surrounding areas to verify whether there was any threat to people’s lives.

Fuad Abu Qleiq, who was sheltering in the school, said that he stayed behind to collect the body parts at the scene, and expressed his sorrow for the fate of the families that came seeking shelter under UNRWA’s roof. He said angrily, “UNRWA should have protected us, but it couldn’t, and Israel did not show any respect for it.”

Medical sources put the death toll at 17 and said 65 people were injured as a result of the massacre. The sources said that most injuries were critical, some requiring urgent surgery, including cases that cannot be treated in Gaza’s hospitals.

Faced with the third attack of its kind on its schools, UNRWA blamed Israel for killing women and children at the Abu Hussein School and called for holding Israel accountable, as an UNRWA delegation examined the scene and collected evidence. According to an UNRWA statement, the delegation analyzed shrapnel samples and examined craters from the shelling and other damage.

The UNRWA statement said, “Last night, children were killed as they slept next to their parents on the floor of a classroom in a UN designated shelter in Gaza. Children killed in their sleep; this is an affront to all of us, a source of universal shame. Today the world stands disgraced.”

The statement continued, “We have visited the site and gathered evidence...Our initial assessment is that it was Israeli artillery that hit our school, in which 3,300 people had sought refuge...These are people who were instructed to leave their homes by the Israeli army.”

UNRWA stressed that the Israeli army had been notified of the exact location of the school and its coordinates, saying, “The precise location of the Jabalia Elementary Girls School and the fact that it was housing thousands of internally displaced people was communicated to the Israeli army seventeen times, to ensure its protection; the last being at ten to nine last

night, just hours before the fatal shelling." In the same vein, UNRWA Commissioner General Pierre Krähenbühl said, "I condemn in the strongest possible terms this serious violation of international law by Israeli forces." Krähenbühl added, "This is the sixth time that one of our schools has been struck. Our staff, the very people leading the humanitarian response are being killed. Our shelters are overflowing. Tens of thousands may soon be stranded in the streets of Gaza, without food, water and shelter if attacks on these areas continue."

Krähenbühl concluded, "We have moved beyond the realm of humanitarian action alone. We are in the realm of accountability. I call on the international community to take deliberate international political action to put an immediate end to the continuing carnage."

Meanwhile, UNRWA spokesperson Adnan Abu Hasna said that the agency held an emergency meeting, and came out with several decisions including measures to assist the family of the slain janitor, who he said "was the responsibility of the agency." Abu Hasna said that UNRWA would need to provide for his nine children and offer them support and compensation.

It should be noted that UNRWA had claimed during the current conflict that it had found weapons in one of its schools. UNRWA rushed to announce this in a statement without investigating the incident following protocol, which helped the Israeli side justify its attacks in front of public opinion. However, the massacre at Abu Hussein was clearly unprovoked and unjustified even by UNRWA and Israeli standards.

This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.

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