

Israel committed war crimes in Gaza, Amnesty International finds

By Jean Shaoul
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Amnesty International (AI) has concluded that Israel used disproportionate military force during last summer's 50-day Operation Protective Edge in Gaza.

Israeli bombs killed entire Palestinian families in their homes without warning or military purpose, which would constitute war crimes.

A damning Amnesty report, *Families Under Rubble*, says, "Israeli forces killed scores of Palestinian civilians in attacks targeting houses full of people, which in some cases have amounted to war crimes." It accuses Israel of "callous indifference" towards the lives of civilians, adding that the country's military may be guilty of war crimes.

Amnesty has detailed eight instances in which people's homes were attacked with large aerial bombs without warning, resulting in the deaths of at least 104 civilians, including 62 children. It gives numerous accounts of eyewitnesses who describe the horror of sifting through the rubble of their destroyed homes for loved ones. One survivor describes holding a bag full of the "shreds" of her son's body.

Philip Luther, director of AI's Middle East and North Africa Programme, said, "Israeli forces have brazenly flouted the laws of war by carrying out a series of attacks on civilian homes, displaying callous indifference to the carnage caused."

In some of the cases, Amnesty was unable to identify any obvious military target, in which case the attacks deliberately targeted civilians and would constitute war crimes. Israeli officials refused to provide justification for the attacks cited in the report or even acknowledge that they happened.

In other cases, Amnesty identified possible military targets that could have justified attacks but stressed that the mass loss of civilian lives accompanying the strikes clearly outweighed any advantages. Luther said, "The repeated, disproportionate attacks on homes indicate that

Israel's current military tactics are deeply flawed and fundamentally at odds with the principles of international humanitarian law.

"What is crucial now is that there is accountability for any violations of international humanitarian law that have been committed. The Israeli authorities must provide answers."

Luther called for the UN Security Council to refer the issue to the International Criminal Court (ICC) so that the prosecutor could investigate allegations of crimes under international law by all parties. But both organisations are subject to US dictates and bullying. Washington has traditionally vetoed all resolutions in the Security Council hostile to Israel, while last Thursday the ICC's chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said she would not be taking action over Israel's raid on a Gaza-bound flotilla in 2010 that killed ten Turkish activists. She said that despite "reasonable basis" that war crimes had been committed, the ICC had to prioritise larger-scale events.

"I have concluded that the potential case(s) likely arising from an investigation into this incident would not be of 'sufficient gravity' to justify further action by the ICC," she said.

Israel dismissed the report as "a propaganda tool for Hamas and other terror groups" and questioned its methodology. This was because Amnesty, along with other well-known international human rights organisations, had been denied access to Gaza since 2012, and had thus been forced to carry out the research for the report remotely, in conjunction with two fieldworkers based in Gaza.

The Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying that Amnesty "ignores documented war crimes perpetrated by Hamas" and "The report does not mention the word terror in relation to Hamas or other armed Palestinian groups, nor mentions tunnels built by Hamas to infiltrate Israel and perpetrate terror attacks."

This is a barefaced lie, as AI pointed out that Palestinian armed groups committed war crimes by firing thousands of rockets indiscriminately into Israel, killing six civilians, including one child.

Israel announced that it would not co-operate with the Commission of Inquiry established by the UN Human Rights Council. While Israel claims to be carrying out investigations into 90 separate incidents, nothing will come of them.

Amnesty International was not alone in accusing Israel of war crimes. Human Rights Watch, the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem and UN officials also charged Israel with breaching international law.

Unable to provide any progressive response to the decades long Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and confronting mounting social tensions among Israelis and Palestinians alike, the Israeli government launched a homicidal campaign against the defenceless Palestinians in Gaza.

According to UN figures, Operation Protective Edge killed 2,192 Palestinians, including 1,523 of whom 519 were children, injured tens of thousands more, and destroyed or damaged at least 18,000 homes, making up to 10 percent of the population homeless. The Israel Defense Force (IDF) attacked schools, including UN schools, hospitals, water plants, sewage treatment plants, ambulances and journalists. Their indiscriminate assassination attempts against leaders of the Islamist Hamas movement killed dozens of their family members. Israel in contrast lost six civilians, one migrant worker, and 64 soldiers.

Oxfam, the international aid agency, said that, “under current restrictions and rate of imports it could take more than 50 years to build the 89,000 new homes [those destroyed in previous wars have still not been rebuilt], 226 new schools, as well as the health facilities, factories and water and sanitation infrastructure that people in Gaza need.”

This savage war had the backing of the Obama administration and the European powers until angry international protests and demonstrations against Israel’s inhumanity threatened to set off a widespread anti-war movement that would cut across Washington’s plans for a wider war in Iraq and Syria. Israel was therefore forced by the imperialist powers to bring the war to a temporary end, agreeing to a deal that would see the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas police Gaza on Israel’s behalf.

While various Arab and Western governments pledged \$5.4 billion at a donor conference hosted in Cairo last

month, more than half will go to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its security forces, already the largest in the world relative to its population. A massive 26 percent of the PA’s budget, ahead of education (16 percent) and health (9 percent), goes on security, while nearly half of its workforce is employed in security.

The Palestine Liberation Organization told the Ma’an News Agency last Sunday that no date had been set for implementing reconstruction projects in Gaza.

General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, speaking about the Amnesty report, told a New York meeting of the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs that he thought the Israel Defence Force “did what they could” to avoid civilian casualties. “I actually do think that Israel went to extraordinary lengths to limit collateral damage and civilian casualties,” he declared. “In this kind of conflict, where you are held to a standard that your enemy is not held to, you’re going to be criticized for civilian casualties.”

Dempsey said that the Pentagon had three months ago sent a “lessons-learned team” of senior officers and non-commissioned officers to work with the IDF to see what could be learned from the Gaza operation.

For the European Union, it was business as usual. The EU’s new Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini went to Israel on Friday to see Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. While she criticised recent terrorist attacks and Israel’s settlement construction in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, she said nothing about the Amnesty report.

In the West Bank and East Jerusalem, tensions are rising amid widespread fears of another intifada. Within Israel itself, angry riots broke out when a Palestinian youth was shot and killed in a town near Nazareth by security forces, whose fabricated justification was exposed by a video clip. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UNIXJ7QQGM#t=15>].

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