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Gaza doctors encounter 'unexplained injuries'

By Donald Macintyre in Gaza

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Doctors in Gaza are reporting what they say are unexplained injuries among the dead and wounded in operations by the Israeli military, which have killed more than 200 Palestinians in the past nine weeks.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) is considering whether there is a case for an investigation into the injuries amid suspicions by the medics that the injuries were inflicted by what they claim may have been unidentified "non-conventional" weapons.

Beside especially severe burning "down to the bones", the doctors say that, in other cases, internal organs have been ruptured without any obvious sign of shrapnel wounds.

While a report from the Hamas-run Ministry of Health said the injuries raised the possibility Israel could be using "unprecedented" projectiles with "radiant" substances, the medics acknowledge that there is no proof so far of their claims. They also admit that the difficulty of establishing the exact cause of death is greatly exacerbated by the reluctance of most bereaved Palestinian families to allow autopsies.

Dr Juma al Saqqa, the director of public relations at Shifa Hospital, said the type of injuries presented by some victims were "very strange" and added: "We think this should be studied. In some cases we have opened the abdomen and found very fragmented organs." He said this was despite X-rays showing no shrapnel lodged in the patients' bodies. He said one, unsubstantiated suggestion by sympathetic doctors consulted in Italy was that some injuries might have been caused by phosphorus.

The concerns were aired at the weekend by a group of Palestinian medics during a visit to Gaza by a delegation from Physicians for Human Rights - Israel (PHR). The delegation agreed to take away fragments of tissue from the bodies of Palestinians killed during the recent military operations in Gaza for possible analysis in Israel but urged the medics to seek an international investigation.

Dr Ambrogio Manenti, the head of the WHO's West Bank and Gaza office, said the organisation had undertaken a short preliminary assessment of the claims and had now referred the issue to the organisation's headquarters in Geneva so that it can decide whether fuller investigation was appropriate. The Israel Defence Forces said yesterday all its "weapons and ammunition are legal under international law and conform with international standards". It said it could not respond in greater detail without more information about the injuries.

A leader of the PHR delegation, Professor Zvi Bentwich, said PHR was focusing on raising the numbers of patients allowed out of Gaza into Israel and Egypt for treatment and the relief of equipment and medicine shortages because of frequent closures of the main Karni crossing, and external training for Palestinian medical staff.

PHR is pressing the Israeli authorities to reduce the costs of patients being treated in Israel. Professor Bentwich said the denial of external specialist treatment to Palestinians was a denial "of the basic human right to health".

He added that military operations since militants captured the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in June had "exacerbated an already appalling situation". The army said the attacks were aimed at releasing Cpl Shalit and halting the firing of rockets into Israel.