

## **Amnesty International: Israel using Palestinians as human shields**

Bethlehem - Ma'an - Amnesty International said on Wednesday that both Israeli soldiers and Palestinian fighters were endangering the lives of Palestinian civilians—including by using them as human shields and by battling in densely populated residential areas.

"Our sources in Gaza report that Israeli soldiers have entered and taken up positions in a number of Palestinian homes, forcing families to stay in a ground-floor room while they use the rest of their house as a military base and sniper position," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Program director.

"This clearly increases the risk to the Palestinian families concerned and means they are effectively being used as human shields," he said.

Both Israeli soldiers and Palestinian gunmen are continuing to fire at each other from areas close to civilian homes, endangering their inhabitants. Israeli forces have bombed civilian homes and other buildings, arguing that they had been used as cover by gunmen firing at Israeli targets, although Palestinian fighters usually vacate the areas as soon as they have fired.

"The Israeli army is well aware that Palestinian gunmen usually leave the area after having fired and that any reprisal attack against these homes will in most cases cause harm to civilians—not gunmen," said Smart. "Fighters on both sides must not carry out attacks from civilian areas. Any such attacks are unlawful."

"The use of these tactics at a time when armed confrontations are taking place in streets in the middle of densely populated residential areas underlines the failure of both sides to respect the protected status of civilians in armed conflict," Smart said.

He added that "it underlines, too, the urgent need for an independent investigation into alleged abuses, including possible war crimes, by both sides and for perpetrators to be held to account."

Amnesty International USA said it is not enough for Israel to halt military operations in Gaza for three hours a day, which will do little to stop the suffering and unfolding humanitarian catastrophe there. The human rights organization repeated its call that Israel, Hamas and Palestinian armed groups observe a full humanitarian truce to respond to the needs of the beleaguered civilian population.

"A truce that lasts for a few hours a day is simply insufficient. It's too short to address the urgent and massive needs of the civilians who are caught in the hostilities and suffering heavy casualties," said Curt Goering, senior deputy executive director, Amnesty International USA.

"Israel has severely blockaded aid for nearly all of 2008. The [Israeli military] can't let aid in for three hours and pretend that is sufficient. Nor would a daily brief 'recess' guarantee the safety of humanitarian workers," Goering noted.

"A three-hour respite from the bombing understates the scale of what is happening and the need to evacuate the wounded and provide safe refuge for civilians wishing to flee the conflict zone. This cannot be accomplished in such a short period of time," Goering said.

Amnesty International has repeatedly urged Israel, Hamas, and other Palestinian armed groups to end attacks on civilians and other violations of international humanitarian law and to allow access to humanitarian assistance. The organization has urged the U.N. Security Council and the international community to ensure compliance with international law.

Following Tuesday's attack on a school in Jabaliya Refugee Camp, an Israeli government spokesperson said their forces shelled the school after Palestinian gunmen fired at them from it, but this is disputed. The artillery strike that killed some 40 Palestinians, including children, and wounded more than 50 others, "appears clearly to have been a disproportionate attack," Amnesty International said in a statement.

The practice by Israeli soldiers of taking over Palestinian civilians' homes and holding their inhabitants as human shields while using the house as a shooting position has been very common in the past eight years both in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank. The use of human shields in conflict is prohibited under the Geneva Conventions.

Palestinian families caught up in the current fighting in the Gaza Strip report that in some cases Palestinian gunmen have agreed to vacate areas near civilian homes without firing at Israeli forces when local residents have objected to their presence.

In other cases, they have refused the residents' requests and only left after firing. In still other cases, residents say they were too scared to ask the gunmen to leave.

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