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Israel violated international law in Gaza war: UN

* Report by UN rights chief deplors 'nearly total impunity' for violations ranging from torture, extrajudicial execution, forced eviction, home demolition to restrictions on freedom of movement

GENEVA: There is significant evidence that Israeli forces violated international law and human rights in their invasion of Gaza between late December and mid-January, the United Nations human rights chief said on Friday.

A report by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay lambasted the "nearly total impunity" for the violations. The already critical human rights situation in the occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) deteriorated further during the war, she said in the report, the first of a series of periodic reports ordered by the UN Human Rights Council in January during Israel's "Operation Cast Lead".

The 34-page report is one of two - together with a forthcoming one by South African jurist Richard Goldstone who has been conducting hearings in Gaza - that will be presented to the council next month. "...significant prima facie evidence indicates that serious violations of international humanitarian law as well as gross human rights violations occurred during the military operations of 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009, which were compounded by the blockade that the population of Gaza endured in the months prior to Operation Cast Lead and which continues," Pillay said. Pillay said rights violations included arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, extrajudicial execution, forced eviction and home demolition, settlement expansion and related violence and restrictions on freedom of movement and expression. "While these violations are of deep concern in their own right, the nearly total impunity that persists for such violations (regardless of the responsible duty bearer) is of grave concern, and constitutes a root cause for their persistence," the former South African high court judge said.

Pillay's recommendations included the following:

- * Israel should lift the blockade of Gaza and restrictions on movement in and out of the West Bank, which amount to illegal collective punishment.
- * Allegations of violations of humanitarian law and human rights during the Gaza war should be investigated by independent bodies, and victims should have the right to reparations.
- * Israel should tackle impunity for violations, and curb its use of the military justice system, which does not meet international standards.
- * Israel should end the illegal expansion of settlements in the occupied territory, halt evictions and demolitions of Palestinian homes, and end settler violence.

Unlike rulings of the UN Security Council, the findings and recommendations of the Human Rights Council are not binding. reuters

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