

Israel warns Rudd off racism forum

- **Jason Koutsoukis**
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SENIOR Israeli diplomat Dan Gillerman has urged Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd not to send a delegation to a United Nations forum on racism, saying it will be used as a platform to bash Israel.

In an interview with *The Age*, Mr Gillerman, who was Israel's ambassador to the United Nations from 2003 until September last year, also strongly rejected calls for war crimes investigations against Israeli commanders involved in the recent Gaza offensive.

Speaking from his office in Tel Aviv ahead of a scheduled visit to Australia at the end of the month, Mr Gillerman said the 2009 UN World Conference Against Racism, also known as "Durban II", to be held in Geneva in April, was a charade.

"Keep away from Durban," Mr Gillerman said.

"Countries like Australia who, to my mind, represents the best of what democracy and civilisation can be, shouldn't take part in this charade."

Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni announced in November that Israel would boycott the conference because "it was turning once again into an anti-Israeli tribunal".

Last month Canada announced that it was also boycotting the conference.

France, Britain and the Netherlands may also pull out, while the United States is still considering whether to reverse the Bush administration's decision not to attend.

A key Israeli objection is that the UN committee managing the conference is chaired by Libya, with vice-chairs from Iran, Pakistan, Cuba, Russia, Indonesia and Turkey.

"I think that the (fewer) enlightened Western civilised societies attend the conference, the more it will be seen as the stage for anti-Semitism, racism and Israel-bashing that it is," Mr Gillerman said.

He also lashed out at critics of the war in Gaza who wanted to investigate Israeli commanders for alleged war crimes.

The International Criminal Court is exploring whether it can satisfy a request by the Palestinian Authority that Israeli commanders be investigated for offences including the use of white phosphorus in densely populated civilian areas.

Amnesty International has declared Israel's use of white phosphorus in Gaza "indiscriminate" and a war crime.

And on January 24, a research team from Human Rights Watch visited the town of Khozaa in the southern Gaza Strip, where its researcher Marc Garlasco, a weapons expert, concluded that there had been heavy use of white phosphorus.

"I think the Israeli troops should get a medal for the way they conducted themselves in that war," Mr Gillerman said.

"I don't think any war crimes were committed."

Mr Gillerman, who was asked by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to help frame Israel's international justification for the offensive which killed more than 1300 people in Gaza, said civilian casualties were unavoidable because of Hamas' preparedness "to use human shields".

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