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## US pressure forces UN to defer vote on Gaza war crimes report

\* Israel faced condemnation over failure to cooperate with UN probe

GENEVA: The United Nations put off taking action on Friday on a UN report that accuses both Israel and by Palestinian militants of war crimes in Gaza, after US pressure aimed at getting the peace process back on track.

The move is an early concrete result of the Obama administration's engagement in the Human Rights Council, which Washington joined in June. The Council had been due to vote on Friday on a resolution that would have condemned Israel's failure to cooperate with a UN war crimes investigation led by Richard Goldstone, and forwarded his report to the Security Council.

But Pakistan, speaking for Arab, Islamic, and African sponsors of a resolution, formally asked the forum to defer action on their text until the next regular session in March. This would "give more time for a broad-based and comprehensive consideration" of the report, Pakistan's envoy Zamir Akram told the 47-member-state forum. A diplomatic source said the move had followed intense lobbying by the United States, which is seeking to restart peace negotiations in the Middle East. "There is agreement to defer given immense pressure from the United States," he told Reuters.

Earlier, Palestinian ambassador Ibrahim Khraishi said his delegation would not give up what he called the "legal track", and planned to pursue the issue at the rights council in March. "It will be deferred for the coming session, giving more time to all the parties, Israelis and Palestinians, to discuss a very important and historic report," Khraishi told Reuters. "We insist that the legal track is helping the political one."

The investigation by Goldstone, a former UN war crimes prosecutor, found that both the Israeli armed forces and Hamas fighters committed war crimes during the December-January war. A Palestinian rights group says 1,417 Palestinians, including 926 civilians, were killed in the Gaza war. Israel has said 709 Palestinian combatants were killed along with 295 civilians and 162 people whose status it was unable to clarify. Israel lost 10 soldiers and 3 civilians in the offensive.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Thursday that the United Nations would deal a "fatal blow" to prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace if it endorsed the report - which he sees as more critical of Israel's military than of the Palestinians. Goldstone's report urges the Security Council to refer the allegations to the International Criminal Court in the Hague if either Israeli or Palestinian authorities fail to investigate and prosecute those suspected of such crimes within six months. reuters

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