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Lebanon/Israel: 48 hours not enough as war crimes continue

The devastating attack on Qana makes clear that an immediate and full ceasefire is urgently needed. Measures taken by Israel to temporarily suspend airstrikes over southern Lebanon are insufficient. Both sides to this conflict have shown a blatant disregard for the laws of war and civilians on both sides are paying the price as war crimes abound, Amnesty International said today.

"In view of the defiant disregard for fundamental humanitarian principles by both parties, it would appear that only an immediate, full and effective cease-fire will protect civilians on both sides of this conflict," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

"It is utterly shameful that governments who have influence over Israel and Hizbollah and who could help end this crisis, continue to prioritize political and military interests over innocent lives of civilians."

Amnesty International is calling on the international community to urgently negotiate an immediate and full ceasefire, and to convene a meeting of the High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Conventions to ensure that attacks such as Qana are independently and impartially investigated and those suspected of war crimes brought to justice.

Amnesty International researchers in Lebanon who went to Qana shortly after the bombing found rescue workers pulling children's bodies from the rubble and digging furiously in search of survivors. At Tyre hospital, Mohamed Qasem Shalhoub, whose wife, elderly mother and five children aged from two to 11 were killed, said that he had been in a room in the basement and that 17 children were sleeping close by him, only one of whom survived. Another survivor, whose sister and brother were killed, told Amnesty International that she and her family had been sheltering in the house for the past 10 days, emerging during the day to wash, and that their presence must have been known to Israeli forces whose surveillance drones frequently flew over the village.

"Calls for the warring parties to obey the laws of war and protect civilians have fallen on deaf ears. Israel is carrying out disproportionate and targeted attacks on civilians and humanitarian workers, while Hizbollah continues to launch rockets at Israeli civilian population centres," said Irene Khan.

Israeli authorities have claimed that Hizbollah intentionally used civilians in Qana as "human shields". International humanitarian law expressly prohibits the use of tactics such as "human shields" to prevent an attack on military targets. However, international humanitarian law also makes it clear that even if one side is shielding itself behind civilians, such an abuse does not "...release the Parties to the conflict from their legal obligations with respect to the civilian population and civilians."

Reports that Israel has warned all civilians living south of the Litani River to leave the area demonstrates how the concept of effective warning is being distorted. If anything, such a warning to over 400,000 people seems only to spread panic among the civilian population, rather than enhance their safety. Many fear they are more likely to be attacked on the road. Some simply are not able to leave. In several cases where Israeli forces gave warning to residents of certain towns or villages in southern Lebanon, they then attacked those trying to flee. Israel's relentless bombing of roads and bridges has also made it extremely difficult for civilians in south Lebanon to flee north following warnings from Israel.

Under customary international law, intentionally launching a disproportionate or indiscriminate attack or intentionally directing attacks at civilians or civilian objects is a war crime.

“The concept of ‘free-fire’ zones is incompatible with international humanitarian law. The attack in Qana is symptomatic of the way in which this conflict has been fought to date and indicates either that Israel is failing to take necessary precautions to spare civilians or that it has intentionally launched a disproportionate attack on civilians,” said Irene Khan.

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