

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: IOR 41/002/2009
8 January 2009

UN Human Rights Council must assist civilians caught in Gaza conflict

Amnesty International calls on the UN Human Rights Council to speak with the united voice of all members in demanding an immediate end to attacks against civilians in the Gaza conflict and other serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law when it meets in special session on 9 January to discuss the crisis.

The Council must call for concrete measures to end and relieve the humanitarian catastrophe now unfolding in Gaza, where some 1.5 million civilians are trapped and exposed to unacceptable danger. It must also demand an end to the indiscriminate rocket attacks that endanger civilians in southern Israel.

The Council must demand that all parties to the current conflict – Israel, Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups – immediately end all unlawful attacks against civilians and other serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

The Council must demand an immediate humanitarian truce sufficient at least to make it possible to provide basic necessities to civilians in dire need, permit the evacuation and treatment of the wounded and the burial of the dead, ensure the safety of humanitarian workers, and allow civilians the opportunity to seek safe refuge from the fighting. The daily three hour halt to bombing which Israel introduced yesterday, a day after its soldiers shelled a UN school killing some 40 Palestinians, is far from adequate and has brought little real respite to Gaza's civilians.

The Council must call on Israel to allow human rights and humanitarian workers and journalists immediate unfettered access to Gaza, from which they have been barred with a few brief exceptions since early November. Their presence is needed urgently in order to independently assess humanitarian needs and to report on the situation on the ground, including violations of international law.

Prima facie evidence of possible war crimes and crimes against humanity is emerging daily. The Council must not ignore it. It must use its authority to call for an urgent and thorough independent and impartial investigation and for perpetrators of war crimes, crimes against humanity and other serious violations of international law to be held to account. The Council should play a substantial role in ensuring that such an investigation is established without delay and is carried out by a body composed of suitably experienced independent experts of acknowledged integrity, who must be adequately resourced and be ready to deploy to the conflict areas as soon as security conditions permit.

Where appropriate, states must also be ready to initiate criminal investigations into these crimes and carry out prosecutions before their own courts if the evidence warrants it.

The Council must also insist that any international monitors deployed to the area as part of a resolution to the conflict are fully mandated to investigate and report on any ongoing abuses of human rights or international humanitarian law by any of the parties to the conflict, and commit to taking appropriate action in response to reports of such abuses.

Background

In Gaza, one of the most densely-populated areas of the world, 1.5 million people are trapped and exposed to constant artillery and other bombardment by Israel forces as they continue to confront Palestinian fighters. In the 12 days since Israel launched its offensive against Gaza, more than 670 Palestinians have been killed, many of them civilians and including scores of children. Some 3,000 Palestinians, also including many children and other civilians, have been injured. Israeli air strikes and artillery shelling has destroyed basic infrastructure, there are food and water shortages, and hospitals are overwhelmed with casualties and running short of medicines.

Palestinian armed groups continue to fire rockets indiscriminately into southern Israel. Four Israelis have been killed in such attacks in the past 12 days, including three civilians, and other civilians have been injured.

END/