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Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territories: Israel's use of white phosphorus against Gaza civilians "clear and undeniable"

Amnesty International delegates visiting the Gaza Strip found indisputable evidence of widespread use of white phosphorus in densely populated residential areas in Gaza City and in the north.

"Yesterday, we saw streets and alleyways littered with evidence of the use of white phosphorus, including still burning wedges and the remnants of the shells and canisters fired by the Israeli army," said Christopher Cobb-Smith, a weapons expert who is in Gaza as part of a four-person Amnesty International fact-finding team.

"White phosphorus is a weapon intended to provide a smokescreen for troop movements on the battlefield," said Cobb-Smith. "It is highly incendiary, air burst and its spread effect is such that it that should never be used on civilian areas".

"Such extensive use of this weapon in Gaza's densely populated residential neighbourhoods is inherently indiscriminate. Its repeated use in this manner, despite evidence of its indiscriminate effects and its toll on civilians, is a war crime," said Donatella Rovera, Amnesty's researcher on Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

White phosphorus wedges are scattered all around residential buildings and many were still burning on Sunday, further endangering the residents and their property; streets and alleys are full of children playing, drawn to the detritus of war and often unaware of the danger.

"Artillery is an area weapon; not good for pinpoint targeting. The fact that these munitions, which are usually used as ground burst, were fired as air bursts increases the likely size of the danger area," said Chris Cobb-Smith.

Each 155mm artillery shell bursts deploying 116 wedges impregnated with white phosphorus which ignite on contact with oxygen and can scatter, depending on the height at which it is burst (and wind conditions), over an area at least the size of a football pitch. In addition to the indiscriminate effect of air-bursting such a weapon, firing such shells as artillery exacerbates the likelihood that civilians will be affected.

Amnesty International delegates found both burning white phosphorous wedges and their carrier shells (which delivered them) in and around houses and buildings. Some of these heavy steel 155mm shells have caused extensive damage to residential properties.

Among the places worst affected by the use of white phosphorus was the UNRWA compound in Gaza City, where Israeli forces fired three white phosphorus shells on 15 January. The white phosphorus landed next to

some fuel trucks and caused a large fire which destroyed tons of humanitarian aid. Prior to this strike the compound had already been hit an hour earlier and the Israeli authorities had been informed by UNRWA officials and had given assurance that no further strikes would be launched on the compound.

In another incident on the same day a white phosphorus shell landed in the al-Quds hospital in Gaza City also causing a fire which forced hospital staff to evacuate the patients.

White phosphorus landing on skin can burn deep through muscle and into the bone, continuing to burn unless deprived of oxygen.

Background

Separate unilateral ceasefires announced by Israel and by Hamas with effect from 18 January were not respected by either side. Israeli forces remained stationed in several areas of the Gaza Strip and on the morning of 18 January missiles fired by Israeli forces killed 11-year-old Angham Rif'at al-Masri and injured her mother east of Beit Hanoun in the north of the Gaza Strip. At the same time Palestinian armed groups fired several rockets into towns and villages in southern Israel, lightly wounding three Israeli civilians.