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Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territories: Gaza conflict - full arms embargo vital as US munitions reported on way to Israel

A full arms embargo on all parties involved in the Gaza conflict is urgently needed to prevent further unlawful attacks and other violations of international law, as the civilian death toll continues to mount in Gaza. At least 900 Palestinians have so far been killed, more than a third of them civilians, including some 200 Palestinian children – as more US munitions are en route to the region.

“The last thing that is needed now is more weapons and munitions in the region, which is awash with arms that are being used in a manner which contravenes international law and is having a devastating effect on the civilian population in Gaza,” said Malcolm Smart, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme.

Amnesty International says the UN Security Council must act now and impose an immediate, comprehensive arms embargo on all parties to the conflict in Gaza to prevent any further flow of arms to the warring parties.

“We know that the Wehr Elbe, a German-owned cargo ship, left the USA on 20 December 2008 with a large consignment – 989 containers - of high explosives and other munitions,” said Malcolm Smart. “Hired and now legally controlled by the US Military Sealift Command, it is destined for the Israeli port of Ashdod and was due to transit via Greece, though its latest reported position indicates that the shipment’s route may have changed.”

Tenders for two other arms shipments totalling 325 containers of US munitions were approved by the Pentagon on 31 December, four days after the start of Israel's current attacks on targets in Gaza. These two consignments were due to be shipped to Ashdod, Israel, from Astakos in Greece, but that particular tender has now been cancelled, according to information provided to Amnesty International by the US Military Sealift Command. Tender documents show that these shipments contain white phosphorous, known for its potential to cause severe burns and an indiscriminate weapon when used as an airburst in densely-populated civilian areas as now alleged in Gaza. The US Department of Defence says it is now looking at other means to deliver the munitions to a US stockpile in Israel. A US-Israel agreement has allowed US munitions stockpiled in Israel to be transferred to the Israeli Defence Force in "an emergency."

“The US government should not proceed with these or any other arms shipments to Israel, and the Greek and other governments should not allow their ports or other facilities to be used to ferry arms to Israel or the other parties to this conflict.”

“The plight of civilians in Gaza has become increasingly desperate in the six days since the Security Council’s near unanimous, but unheeded, call for a ceasefire,” said Malcolm Smart. “Israeli forces continue to carry out unlawful attacks, including attacks which are disproportionate, and stand accused of using weapons such as white phosphorous which pose an unacceptable risk to civilians when deployed in densely-

populated areas. Meanwhile, Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups persist in firing indiscriminate rockets into civilian areas in Israel.”

“In addition to locally produced arms, Israeli forces are carrying out unlawful attacks using foreign weaponry and other military equipment supplied mainly by the USA but also from other countries, while rockets and rocket-making equipment smuggled into Gaza from Egypt are being used against the civilian population in southern Israel,” said Malcolm Smart.

A Security Council arms embargo is needed primarily to prevent new weapons supplies reaching the two sides, but it could also send a powerful signal to Israel and Hamas about the Council’s determination to uphold international law.

“The Security Council must insist on full accountability for war crimes and other serious violations committed during this conflict,” said Malcolm Smart. “This means taking steps to ensure that alleged violations are thoroughly and impartially investigated, and that any persons found responsible are brought to justice in fair trials.”

NOTE:

Amnesty International has identified at least 17 states apart from the US that have supplied arms and related materials to Israel since 2001 – the US is by far the largest supplier but significant supplies have also been sent from Germany, France, the UK, Spain, the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, Canada, Slovenia, Australia, Romania, Austria, Belgium, Hungary, Serbia-Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Netherlands and Greece have both been major transit countries to Israel, especially for US arms.

To prevent irresponsible transfers of conventional arms being used for serious violations of international law, including international human rights law and international humanitarian law, Amnesty International and hundreds of other NGOs, including the International Action Network on Small Arms and Oxfam International, have been campaigning for the establishment of a global Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Over 150 Member States have voted for a UN process towards the establishment of an ATT, a process which will resume on 23 January in New York.