

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Open Letter

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Lebanon/Israel: Open letter to foreign ministers meeting in Rome

Dear Foreign Minister,

I write to you on the occasion of this Wednesday's governmental meeting in Rome, called in response to the current conflict involving Israel and Lebanon.

Civilians on both sides of the Israel/Lebanon border have borne the brunt of this conflict. In Israel, at least 17 civilians have been killed and hundreds of others have been injured by rockets fired into civilian areas of Israel by Hizbullah, while in Lebanon Israeli air attacks and bombardments have killed more than 300 civilians, more than a third of them children, and wounded thousands. More than half a million Lebanese have been displaced by Israeli bombings and threats.

Israel is imposing a naval and air blockade of Lebanon. It has attacked Beirut's airport and bombarded the main road out of the country to Syria and dozens of other roads, bridges and other infrastructure, as well as residential areas. The humanitarian situation for civilians remaining in the south is worsening by the day, including in the southern port city of Tyre, which is also having to cope with a large influx of people internally displaced from villages in the south of the country. The destruction by Israel of electricity power plants and other infrastructure has left hospitals, clinics and other medical facilities without the necessary resources and supplies at a time when they have to cope with a massive increase in casualties. Ambulances and rescue crews have reportedly been attacked by Israeli forces as they have tried to reach victims of the bombing.

Some foreign nationals caught up in the conflict have been evacuated through the intervention of their home governments but, as international humanitarian agencies warn, the civilian population of Lebanon now faces a humanitarian disaster.

The international community must ensure that Hizbullah and Israel comply with international humanitarian law. The evidence so far, including the pattern of attacks, the extent of civilian casualties and statements by the parties indicates that serious violations of the laws of war have been committed and continue to be committed by both sides in the conflict. Intentionally directing attacks against civilians and civilian objects and launching indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks are war crimes. All states have an obligation to ensure that allegations of war crimes are investigated promptly. Perpetrators must be brought to justice, and victims and their families must receive reparations. This is the responsibility of all state parties to the Geneva Conventions, not only the parties to the conflict.

The swift and effective nature of the foreign evacuations contrasts sharply with the slowness with which the international community is addressing this burgeoning crisis. At the Rome meeting, key governments must show greater determination to press the parties to the conflict to end attacks on civilians and ensure respect

for international humanitarian law.

In particular, Amnesty International calls on your government to:

Make clear to the parties to the conflict, at the highest level, that it is a war crime to target civilians or civilian objects or to carry out indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks and that they are obligated to conduct criminal investigations of anyone suspected of serious violations of international humanitarian law during the conflict.

Press the parties to the conflict immediately to establish and guarantee humanitarian corridors for the provision of urgent humanitarian assistance to civilians affected by the conflict and safe passage for humanitarian workers.

Call for the urgent dispatch of the International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission (IHFFC), established under Article 90 of Protocol I relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), to investigate incidents where serious violations of the Geneva Conventions and the Protocol are alleged to have taken place. Scrutiny by the IHFFC will be essential to establish the facts independently and authoritatively. It can also act as a deterrent against further abuses by the parties to the conflict.

Pending the establishment of such mechanism, ensure that the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has the necessary resources to monitor, report on and document comprehensively abuses committed by both Hizbullah and Israel.

Call for the convening of a meeting of the High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Conventions to decide on measures to ensure compliance by the parties with international humanitarian law.

Suspend all sales and transfer of arms and military equipment to the parties to the conflict and ensure adequate oversight arrangements are in place to prevent such transfers, and support a UN Security Council arms embargo.

We call on you to act expeditiously to ensure the protection of civilians in Lebanon and Israel, bring the parties into compliance with international humanitarian law, and ensure that there is no impunity for perpetrators of war crimes in this conflict.

Sincerely,

Irene Khan
Secretary General

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