

AI Index: PRE 01/016/2009
15 January 2009

Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territories: Immediate investigation needed into Israeli shelling of UN compound in Gaza

Amnesty International is calling for an immediate and independent investigation into the Israeli army's shelling this morning of a United Nations compound in Gaza City, disrupting the distribution of humanitarian aid to Gaza's beleaguered civilians and injuring three UN workers.

The United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) has reported that shells - apparently containing white phosphorous - struck their compound in Gaza City, injuring three people and setting on fire one building which contained emergency humanitarian assistance. UNRWA said that it had repeatedly asked the Israeli army not to fire in the vicinity of the compound.

"The attack on UNRWA, apparently targeting a clearly identified humanitarian compound, underscores the need for an impartial and thorough investigation into a range of attacks in which civilians were killed or injured and civilian buildings and infrastructure were destroyed," said Malcolm Smart, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme.

"Amnesty International is particularly worried about Israel's use of what seems to be white phosphorus, a substance that causes severe burns when it comes into contact with skin. Although not banned under international law, white phosphorus is an incendiary weapon which should never be used in densely-populated civilian areas due to its devastating effects."

According to UN officials, at least 700 people remain in the compound seeking shelter while fighting continues. UNRWA said that the attack had prevented its trucks leaving the compound to distribute urgently needed food and medical supplies.

"International law unequivocally forbids attacks against personnel, installations, material, units or vehicles involved in a humanitarian assistance mission," said Malcolm Smart. "Deliberate attacks on humanitarian assistance facilities or personnel may constitute a war crime."