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Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territories: Israel must disclose weapons it used in Gaza attacks

Amnesty International today called on the Israeli authorities to disclose the weapons and munitions their forces used during the three week military campaign in Gaza which began on 27 December.

"We now know that white phosphorous munitions were used in built-up civilian areas, although the Israeli authorities previously denied this," said Donatella Rovera, who is heading an Amnesty International investigation team in Gaza. "Now we have irrefutable evidence of the use of this weapon, but the doctors who treated the first casualties did not know what had caused their injuries."

Other victims of the conflict have wounds which doctors say they are finding hard to treat because of uncertainty about the nature of the munitions which caused them.

"Doctors tell us they are encountering new and unexplained patterns of injury among some of the Palestinians injured in Israeli military attacks," said Donatella Rovera. "Some victims of Israeli air strikes were brought in with charred and sharply severed limbs and doctors treating them need to know what weapons were used."

Dr. Subhi Skeik, head of the Surgical Department at al-Shifa Hospital, told Amnesty International delegates: "We have many cases of amputations and vascular reconstructions where patients would be expected to recover in the normal way. But to our surprise many of them died an hour or two after operation. It is dramatic."

"It is vital and urgent that the Israeli authorities disclose all relevant information including what weapons and munitions they used," said Donatella Rovera. "More lives must not be lost because doctors do not know what caused their patients' injuries and what medical complications may occur. They have to be fully informed so that they can provide life-saving care."

Israel's earlier refusal to confirm that its troops had used white phosphorus meant that doctors were unable to provide correct treatment. White phosphorous particles embedded in the flesh can continue to burn, causing intense pain as the burns grow wider and deeper, and can result in irreparable damage to internal organs. It can contaminate other parts of the patient's body or even those treating the injuries.

"We noticed burns different from anything we had ever dealt with before," one burns specialist at Gaza's al-Shifa Hospital told Amnesty International. "After some hours the burns became wider and deeper, gave off an offensive odour and then they began to smoke."

The condition of people with burns caused by white phosphorus can deteriorate rapidly. Even those with

burns that cover a relatively small area of the body – 10 to 15 per cent – who would normally survive, can deteriorate and die. Only after a number of foreign doctors arrived in the Gaza Strip, days after they had seen the first casualties of white phosphorus, did local doctors learn what had caused the wounds and how to treat them.

A 16-year-old girl, Samia Salman Al-Manay'a, was asleep in her home in the Jabalia refugee camp, north of Gaza City, when a phosphorous shell landed on the first floor of the house at 8pm on 10 January. Ten days later, from her hospital bed, she told Amnesty International that she was still experiencing intense pain due to the burns to her face and legs. "The pain is piercing. It's as though a fire is burning in my body. It's too much for me to bear. In spite of all the medicine they are giving me the pain is still so strong."

Without knowing what they were, Palestinians whose houses were hit by phosphorous shells or burning debris from them, mistakenly threw water on the flames, only for the fire to intensify. When doctors, seemingly unaware, tried to wash patients' wounds with saline solutions, they screamed in pain. And when they changed the dressings on patients' burns they were shocked to see smoke rise from the wound. When they conducted investigative operations, they extracted small pieces of felt which started to burn immediately when they were exposed to the air.

"Israeli officials have repeatedly said that its military operation was against Hamas, not against the people of Gaza. There can be no excuse for continuing to withhold information vital to effective treatment of people wounded in Israeli attacks. Lack of cooperation by Israel is leading to needless deaths and unnecessary suffering," said Donatella Rovera. "The Israeli authorities should fulfil their obligation to ensure prompt and adequate care for the wounded by making a full disclosure of the weapons and munitions they used in Gaza and provide any other relevant information that may help medical teams."

Background

Some 1,300 Palestinians were killed between 27 December 2008 and the ceasefire declared by Israel on 18 January 2009, including more than 400 children and over 100 women. More than 5,300 Palestinians were injured; many will be disabled for the rest of their lives. In the same period, 13 Israelis were killed, including four soldiers who were killed in friendly fire. Nine other Israelis, including three civilians, were killed in attacks by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups.