

Sunday, 28 June 2009

Israel accuses UN mission of being pro-Palestinian UN hears testimonies of Gaza war victims



Despite thousands of civilian testimonies Israel insists it took precautions to avoid civilian casualties

GAZA (Al Arabiya, AFP)

Palestinian victims and witnesses of Israel's three week offensive on Gaza described Sunday the gruesome details of war to a United Nations human rights mission which aims to broadcast the voices of war victims to the international community.

The delegation planned to hold two days of public hearings as part of its investigation into alleged war crimes committed during the 22-day offensive launched in late December, which killed 1,420 Palestinians and 13 Israelis.

The group is headed by Richard Goldstone, a South African judge who previously served as chief prosecutor for international criminal tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

One of the first people to testify was Musa Silawi, a 91-year-old man who recounted an air strike on a mosque in the town of Jabaliya that killed 17 people, including his son and four other members of his extended family.

Witness accounts of war crimes

"After the evening prayers we heard the shell hit the mosque and we had no idea what happened. We all started screaming, 'God help us!'" he said.

"I am 91 years old and I have never seen anything like this catastrophe."

A young wheelchair-bound man named Ziad al-Deeb described how he had been sitting at home with his family, savoring a brief pause in the fighting, when Israeli forces began shelling his neighborhood.

"We were shocked when we heard the loud noise coming from the Israeli shelling, then one of the

missiles landed on top of us. There were 11 people killed," he said.

"My legs were cut off, and then I looked and saw my father and my family. Most of them had been killed. The children were screaming."

One of the investigators asked if there had been any warning before the strike.

"There was no warning," Deeb said. "If there had been we would have left."

Victims tell the world

The mission was expected to look into several allegations of human rights violations that emerged in the aftermath of the assault, which Israel said was aimed at stemming Palestinian rocket fire from the Hamas-ruled enclave.

Part of the information-gathering work of the fact-finding mission, the public hearings will enable victims witnesses and experts to speak to the international community.

"The purpose of the public hearings in Gaza and Geneva is to show the faces and broadcast the voices of victims -- all of the victims," Goldstone said last week.

Israeli authorities have so far refused to allow the investigators into the country and have accused the mission of being pro-Palestinian.

The group plans to hold similar hearings in Geneva in which they will interview witnesses and experts on alleged violations in Israel and the occupied West Bank, it said in a statement.

The U.N. refugee agency said Israeli fire struck several of its facilities during the war, including schools where civilians were sheltering and a large warehouse filled with humanitarian aid that was set on fire.

Rights groups accuse Israel

Rights groups have also accused Israel of using white phosphorous shells -- which are designed to provide a battlefield smoke screen -- in crowded civilian areas, severely burning several people.

Israel has insisted it made every effort to spare civilians and that all the weapons it used are legal under international law.

It has also said that Palestinian fighters and rocket launchers operated in crowded residential areas, using civilians as human shields, a charge also made against Hamas by rights groups.

On their first visit at the start of June the investigators visited 14 sites in Gaza City and northern Gaza and conducted interviews with several individuals and organisations.

On both visits they had to enter the territory from the Rafah crossing point on the border with Egypt after Israel denied them access through its territory.

The 47-member U.N. Human Rights Council voted by a large majority in January to set up the probe into accusations of "grave" human rights violations by Israel, but the team was later given a broader mandate to deal with "all violations" during the conflict.

The group plans to produce a final report for the U.N. Human Rights Council by Sept. 12.

