

**Statement by the UN Human Rights Office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory on the developments in Gaza**

21 March 2025

The UN Human Rights office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is horrified by the ongoing killing of hundreds of Palestinian civilians in Gaza since the resumption of large-scale Israeli bombardment on 18 March. As of 20 March, at least 506 Palestinians were killed, including 200 children and at least 112 women according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza.

Airstrikes and artillery shelling have struck homes, schools serving as shelters, and tents of internally displaced people — a pattern extensively documented by the UN Human Rights Office since October of 2023. The Israeli military appear to have resumed the practice of using explosive weapons with wide-area effects in densely populated areas. Across Gaza, since 18 March, the UN Human Rights office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory recorded at least three incidents where more than twenty fatalities were reported, and at least eight incidents with more than ten fatalities. Using explosive weapons with wide-area effects in such densely populated areas will almost certainly have indiscriminate effects and is very likely to be in violation of international humanitarian law rules on the conduct of hostilities.

Conducting hostilities using such means and methods in densely populated areas causes civilian casualties at a mass scale and is not consistent with Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law, including abiding by the fundamental principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions in attack.

On 20 March, Hamas's military wing, Al Qassam Brigades, announced firing rockets on Tel Aviv. No casualties were reported. The targeting of civilians or launching of indiscriminate attacks amounts to a war crime.

Israel is again issuing forced displacement orders across Gaza and imposing severe movement restrictions. On 19 March, the Israeli military announced redeployment in Netzarim corridor which separates the north of Gaza from the south and prohibited Palestinians from moving through Salah Ad Deen road. The Israeli military ordered all Palestinians residing in areas located in the vicinity of the fence, described as "dangerous combat zones", to leave to "known shelters" in western Gaza City and Khan Yunis.

The return of heavy bombardment and mass displacement orders indicates a resurgence of the pattern which has already forced 90 per cent of Palestinians in Gaza into displacement before the ceasefire, often more than once. The devastating impact of mass forced displacement will likely be exacerbated by Israel's blocking of humanitarian aid, the already catastrophic shelter crisis in Gaza, and the lack of access to life-saving services.

Statements by the Israeli government further heighten fears about the deliberate flouting international law prohibitions and further collective punishment.

On the evening of 19 March, a statement by the Israeli Minister of Defence addressed to "residents of Gaza" threatened "significantly worse" strikes if hostages are not released and if Hamas is not expelled

from Gaza, stressing that Gaza residents “will pay the price”. The statement referred to the “option” of “relocating to other parts of the world” if Palestinians “wish” to do so after the demands he outlined are met.

“The alternative”, the statement continued, “is utter destruction and devastation.”

Other statements by Israeli officials explicitly said that one of the goals of the renewed bombardment aims to “damage Hamas’s governmental capabilities” through targeting mid-level and senior-ranking members in Hamas’s Political Bureau, including officials in the civilian de-facto authorities— who, under international law, are civilians entitled to protection except if, and for such time, they directly participate in hostilities. Some civilian officials were reportedly killed with their entire families and children, including Ahmed Al Hatta, Undersecretary for the Ministry of Justice, who was killed with his wife and six children.

Violations by one party to the conflict never justify violations by the other. The targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure across Gaza and any measures constituting forcible transfer of the civilian population or collective punishment are violations of international law and are war crimes.

The heightened Israeli siege since 2 March, which has prevented basic necessities from reaching civilians amounts to collective punishment. We recall that in its March 2024 binding order, the International Court of Justice unanimously ordered Israel to take all necessary and effective measures to ensure the unhindered provision at scale of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance to Palestinians throughout Gaza, to conform with its obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

Israel is legally bound to immediately end and punish breaches of international law, and as the occupying power, to protect Palestinian civilians from violence, ensure the provision of all necessities of life, and ensure they can return to their homes in safety and dignity.

We repeat our call on member states to take decisive action to end hostilities in Gaza and ensure accountability for the grave breaches of international law committed over the past year and a half.

**ENDS**

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