

Israel denies violating international law in Gaza

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Source: AP WorldStream English (all) Date: April 22, 2009

TEL AVIV, Israel_The Israeli military said Wednesday its internal investigations concluded it did not violate international law during the Gaza war, bluntly deflecting war crimes allegations by human rights groups.

Rights activists renewed their call for an independent inquiry, with Human Rights Watch denouncing it as "an insult" to Gaza civilians and proof the military would not objectively examine its conduct.

In Norway on Wednesday, a group of lawyers filed a complaint accusing 10 Israelis, including former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Ehud Barak, of war crimes. The Norwegian government must now determine whether there are grounds for charges or a police investigation.

Israel launched its three-week offensive on Dec. 27 to try to halt daily rocket attacks from Gaza that had terrorized southern Israel for years. The use of air and ground power against Gaza's Islamic Hamas rulers was unprecedented in Israel's war against Palestinian militants, who operate within residential areas.

Palestinians say more than 1,400 Gazans were killed, including 926 civilians. Israel says 1,166 Palestinians were killed, including 709 Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants, 295 civilians and 162 men whose identities could not be confirmed.

The military conducted five separate investigations into some of its most controversial actions during the war, including attacks on and near U.N. and international facilities, shooting at medical workers and facilities, the widespread destruction of Palestinian homes, and the use in densely populated Gaza of white phosphorus, a chemical agent that causes horrific burns.

The investigations uncovered "a very small number of incidents" in which intelligence or operational errors took place during the fighting, the military said. One included an airstrike that killed 21 members of the same family.

"These unfortunate incidents were unavoidable and occur in all combat situations, in particular of the type that Hamas forced on the (Israeli military), by choosing to fight from within the civilian population," the military concluded in a report issued at the briefing.

Deputy chief of staff Maj. Gen. Dan Harel said the military maintained "a high professional and ethical level" while facing an enemy that took cover among uninvolved civilians.

Rights activists were outraged.

"This statement is an insult to the civilians in Gaza who needlessly died and an embarrassment to (Israel Defense Forces) members who take military justice seriously," Human Rights Watch said in a statement from New York. "It shows that the IDF leadership will not objectively monitor itself."

Israeli rights activists called for an independent inquiry "that would look at the whole range of violations the army is incapable of looking at."

"It shows how important it is that Israel cooperate with the fact-finding mission of Goldstone that would look at violations,' said B'Tselem spokeswoman Sarit Michaeli, speaking for various Israeli human rights groups that have made this demand in the past.

Richard Goldstone, a former U.N. chief prosecutor for war crimes, recently was appointed to head a U.N. investigation into atrocities allegedly committed by both sides during the war.

Israel has not said whether it would cooperate with his investigation.

"If they aren't guilty they should allow entry to international investigators from the U.N.," Hamas adviser Ahmed Youssef said after the military released its findings Wednesday.

Among the questions being raised is whether Israel used disproportionate force and failed to protect civilians.

In one case, Israeli artillery fire hit near a U.N. school where hundreds of Gazans had sought refuge, killing 42 people. Israeli said troops responded to fire from militants nearby.

Israel also has been criticized for using white phosphorus weapons, which can be legitimately used in war. But rights activists have said its use over populated areas can indiscriminately burn civilians and constitute a war crime.

Israel says its military took great care to avoid harming civilians in Gaza, preceding some airstrikes with leaflets or phone calls warning civilians to flee _ a contention confirmed by Gaza residents.

In Jerusalem, the U.N.'s top Mideast envoy, Robert Serry, toured several Palestinian areas where Israel had demolished or threatened to demolish homes. He expressed concern about a rising number of demolitions recently and urged Israel to halt the practice.

Serry visited the ruins of a home that had been demolished hours earlier. The demolition left the Hdaidoun family of seven, including five children, homeless. He said the family's distress was "pretty shocking."

Also on Wednesday, the grass-roots OneVoice Movement released a poll showing the vast majority of Israelis and Palestinians are willing to live alongside each other peacefully in separate states.

Results indicate that 74 percent of Palestinians and 78 percent of Israelis are willing to accept a two-state solution.

The group said the poll counters fears that the two-state solution is losing support in Israel and the Palestinian territories.