

Israel 's Collective Punishment of Gaza

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Since Israel began its war on Gaza 11 days ago, more than 560 Palestinians – about a quarter of them civilians – have been killed. Some two thousand Gazans, including hundreds of children, have been wounded. Israel 's "Operation Cast Lead" marks an escalation of Israel 's two-year blockade of the Gaza Strip which has deprived 1.5 million Palestinians of necessary food, medicine, fuel and other necessities.

Israel is using white phosphorous gas, an illegal chemical weapon that burns to the bone. Dr. Mads Gilbert, a member of a Norwegian triage medical team working in Gaza , has documented Israel 's use of Dense Inert Metal Explosive (DIME), which cuts its victims to pieces and reportedly causes cancer in survivors. Gilbert, who has worked in several conflict zones, said the situation in Gaza is the worst he has ever seen. Two United Nations schools have been hit by airstrikes, killing at least 30 people. The New York Times reported on Monday that Gazan hospitals are full of civilians, not Hamas fighters.

The targeting of civilians violates the Fourth Geneva Convention. Since the rockets fired from Gaza into Israel cannot distinguish between civilians and military targets, they are illegal. But Israel 's air and ground attack in Gaza violates Geneva in four ways. First, it constitutes collective punishment of the entire population in Gaza for the acts of a few militants. Second, it targets civilians, as evidenced by the large numbers of civilian casualties. Third, it is a disproportionate response to the rockets fired into Israel . Fourth, an occupying power has an obligation to ensure food and medical supplies to the occupied population; Israel 's blockade has created a humanitarian crisis in Gaza .

Israel's airstrikes and ground assault on the people of Gaza have little to do with the Gazan rockets, which hadn't killed any Israelis for a year before Israel 's current military operation. Israel 's leaders are bombing and attacking Gaza in order to gain an advantage in the upcoming Israeli elections in February.

Foreign Minister Tsipi Livni is locked in a tight race with Benjamin Netanyahu, who has criticized Livni for her "soft" treatment of the Palestinians. The Israeli government seeks to do as much damage as possible to Gaza while Bush is still in office. The New York Times cited several Middle East experts who "believe that Israel timed its move against Hamas, which began on Dec. 26, 25 days before Mr. Bush leaves office, with the expectation of such backing in Washington." Obama, in spite of his unequivocal support for the policies of Israel during the campaign and his deafening silence about the recent casualties, is an unknown quantity.

Israel would be unable to carry out its aggressive policies in Gaza without the support of the United States , which gives Israel \$3 billion in U.S. taxpayer money each year. The F-16

bombers and Apache attack helicopters Israel is using on Gaza were bought with U.S. money.

The war on Gaza also violates U.S. law. The Human Rights and Security Assistance Act mandates that the United States cease all military aid to Israel , which has engaged in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights. The Arms Export Control Act prohibits U.S. weapons from being used for any purpose other than inside the borders of a country for self-defense. Targeting schools, police stations and television broadcast centers is not self-defense.

Although Israel 's supreme court ordered the government to allow international media into Gaza to report on the situation there, Israel has refused. But, according to the New York Times, Israel has given "full access to Israeli political and military commentators." Ethan Bronner, the Times bureau chief in Jerusalem , said, " Israel has never restricted media access like this before, and it should be ashamed . . . It's betraying the principles by which it claims to live."

In spite of the one-sided pro-Israel media coverage in the United States , Newsweek said, "Does it make sense for America to support [Israel 's] policy of punishing Hamas by making life unbearable for 1.5 million Gazans by denying aid and economic development? The answer is no." An editorial in the Los Angeles Times called for "an end to a blockade that amounts to the collective punishment of Palestinians under Hamas rule." And the New York Times editorialized that "the longer the Israeli incursion. . . the more Hamas's popularity grows among its supporters."

Hundreds of thousands of people around the world are protesting Israel 's aggression in Gaza . Ten thousand demonstrated in Israel and scores have taken to the streets in Europe, the Middle East and throughout the United States .

A recent Rasmussen Reports poll found that Americans generally "are closely divided over whether the Jewish state should be taking military action against militants in the Gaza strip." But Democratic voters overwhelmingly oppose the Israeli offensive by a 24-point margin (31-55%). Republicans, on the other hand, overwhelmingly support it (62-27%). Nevertheless, Democratic Party leaders have followed Bush in their uncritical support for Israel .

The United States has blocked a ceasefire resolution in the Security Council. In the absence of council action, the General Assembly is empowered to act under the Uniting for Peace Resolution 377. Assembly president Miguel D'Escoto, who has been critical of Israel 's actions in Gaza , said that "the time has come to take firm action if the UN does not want to be rightly accused of complicity by omission." The Human Rights Council should send a high level fact finding mission to Gaza .

It's time to call a halt to the violence and bloodshed.

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