

'Full blown' humanitarian crisis in Gaza: ICRC

Senior UN official deplores 'horrific tragedy'

AFP, Geneva/Gaza City

The international Red Cross yesterday warned that increasing numbers of civilians in the Gaza Strip are being killed during Israel's military offensive, locking the territory in a "full blown" humanitarian crisis.

"I cannot sufficiently underline the level of concern and anxiety that is felt at the ICRC in relation to the crisis in Gaza," said Pierre Kraehenbuehl, the director of operations for the International Committee of the Red Cross.

"At present we are gravely concerned by the growing number of civilian deaths and injuries, and the growing number of civilian infrastructure including hospitals, that have been affected by Israeli operations," he said at a press briefing in Geneva.

"It is critical that the parties at this point do everything to keep civilians out of the firing line," Kraehenbuehl added, warning that conditions for civilians in the Palestinian territory had become "clearly intolerable."

"There is no doubt in my mind that we are dealing with a full blown and major crisis in humanitarian terms. The situation for the people in Gaza is extreme and traumatic as a result of 10 days of uninterrupted fighting."

Kraehenbuehl said ICRC staff in Gaza had described the past night as "the most frightening to date," as they hunkered down in single rooms in fear of being struck by bombardments in the densely-populated coastal strip.

Although access to the territory for relief supplies had eased, the key problem lay within the Gaza Strip where help was

unable to reach victims due to the intensity of the fighting, the senior ICRC official said. "The point now is movement inside the Gaza Strip."

"We call on the parties, in particular on Israel, to do more to allow the Palestinian Red Crescent and other medical workers to carry out their work and save lives," he added.

Meanwhile, a senior UN official on Tuesday deplored what he called a "horrific tragedy" after visiting a Gaza hospital where doctors struggled to cope with the number of casualties from the Israeli offensive.

"This is a horrific tragedy here and it's getting worse moment after moment. People coming in all the time with more and more injuries," said John Ging, who heads the UN agency for Palestinian refugees UNRWA.



An artillery shell explodes over the Palestinian refugee camp of Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday. Israeli troops battled Hamas fighters in major cities of overcrowded Gaza Tuesday as Israel spurned appeals to halt a war on the Islamists that has killed nearly 600 Palestinians.

Gaza children will keep physical, mental scars

AFP, Gaza City

More than 150 children have died in the Gaza conflict and aid groups say the survivors will carry the physical and psychological scars for as long as they live.

"Children are terribly frightened," said Benedict Dempsey of the Save the Children group. "This will live with them for the rest of their lives."

"It's the sort of experience they'll never forget. They just don't understand what's happening."

The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated, impoverished corners of the Earth and children make up 56 percent of the 1.5 million population.

Even before the Israeli offensive on the Hamas-ruled territory started on December 27, malnourishment and the winter cold had taken a heavy toll.

Aid workers believe just about every Gaza child has been traumatised by the incessant bombardment which Israel says targets the Islamist rulers and aims to silence the daily rocket fire aimed at the Jewish state.

"They can't play, they can't sleep, they can't go to school. They're traumatised," Dempsey said.

At least 159 children are among the more than 580 Palestinians killed in Operation Cast Lead, according to the latest toll from Gaza emergency services.

Gaza hospital overwhelmed

AP, Gaza City

Wailing in grief, Salah Samouni banded his head against a wall inside the hospital morgue where the bodies of his three young nephews lay on the floor Monday.

After 10 days of a relentless Israeli assault, Shifa Hospital, Gaza's largest, is overwhelmed. Bodies were crowded two to a morgue drawer, and some - like 3-year-old Issa, 4-year-old Mohammed and 5-year-old Ahmad - were on the floor.

Shifa's shabby halls echoed Monday with the sounds of people screaming and the wail of ambulance sirens. Many of the wounded were being treated in hallways by harried doctors and nurses running on little sleep. The hospital was powered by emergency generators after shelling damaged power lines.

Since Israel began a ground offensive Saturday, most of the dead and wounded arriving at Shifa are civilians, as Israel's offensive shifts from airstrikes to artillery shelling and fighting

close to densely populated areas.

Israel says it is targeting only the Hamas militants who control Gaza in an attempt to halt seven years of rocket fire at Israeli communities. But the 550 Palestinians who have been killed include at least 200 civilians, according to Dr. Moaiya Hassanein of the Gaza Health Ministry.

On Monday, 20 children between the ages of 2 and 15 were killed, he said. Since the military offensive began Dec. 27, three Israeli civilians and two soldiers have been killed.

Nurse Ahmad Abdul Salam, 34, red-eyed and smelling of sweat, his clothes stained with blood, said he couldn't sleep. "When my shift ends, I help my colleagues. These are our brothers and friends who are being harmed," he said.

The hospital's most gruesome scene was in its morgue, where blood pooled on the floor and refrigerators meant to hold 35 bodies were crammed with 70, laid side-by-side in drawers.

Lying on a gray mat on the

Olmert warns Hezbollah against attacking Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Tuesday again sent a veiled warning to the Lebanese Hezbollah militia that Israel was ready to respond on its northern front if threatened.

"Let it be clear, we will make no compromise on our security... No one should get the wrong impression over our determination and our alertness on any front. We are not afraid of any confrontation or threat," Olmert said.

"We truly hope that no one will put us to the test," he said in a speech broadcast on army radio on the 11th day of Israel's offensive in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.



An Indian Muslim girl holds a placard during a protest in Mumbai yesterday against Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip. Amid mushrooming protests around the globe, the world's top diplomats scrambled to find a way to end one of Israel's deadliest-ever offensives on Gaza that has so far killed nearly 600 Palestinians.

Hamas team in Egypt for Gaza truce talks

AFP, Cairo

A Hamas delegation was in Cairo yesterday to discuss an Egyptian-proposed ceasefire with Israel, 10 days after the Jewish state's unleashed its massive offensive on the Islamists' Gaza Strip stronghold.

The talks with the Palestinian delegation, headed by Emad Al-Alami and Mohammed Nasr from Hamas's Syrian-based political leadership, represent the first such contact since fighting began but hopes of a truce appear dim.

Egypt has a peace deal with Israel and negotiated a previous six-month truce, which expired on December 19, heralding the latest violence in which more than 580 Palestinians have been killed.

Cairo has since been walking a tightrope between accusations of complicity with the Israeli offensive and trying to broker an end to the fighting which has also killed nine Israelis, most of them soldiers.

"We will speak with Egyptian leaders about the aggression in Gaza," Nasr told AFP before leaving Damascus.

"Our position is clear: end the aggression, withdraw (Israeli forces) from Gaza, open the crossing points, especially Rafah, with a total lifting of the blockade."

Arabs pushing Gaza ceasefire at UN

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council will hold a ministerial meeting Tuesday to discuss an Arab call for an immediate ceasefire in the conflict in the Gaza Strip and for protection of Palestinian civilians, diplomats said.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the 15-member body this month, was to chair Tuesday's meeting, scheduled for 5 pm (2200 GMT), according to France's UN Ambassador to the UN Jean-Maurice Ripert said.

A Western diplomat said France was working with Arab states to finalize a draft resolution that would call for an immediate ceasefire, specifically an end to the Israeli military assault as well as to rocket firing into Israel by Gaza-

based militants.

The text would also urge the lifting of the Israeli siege of Gaza to allow humanitarian access to the beleaguered Palestinian population, protection of Palestinian civilians, a resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and a mechanism to monitor the truce and the protection of civilians, diplomats said.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon on Monday met with a delegation of Arab foreign ministers led by Arab League Arab League chief Amr Mousa and the two reported a convergence of views on the need for the Security Council to "act decisively and swiftly" to end the Gaza bloodletting.

"We must insist that Israel end its military assault, which is clearly excessive," Ban told the Arab ministers.

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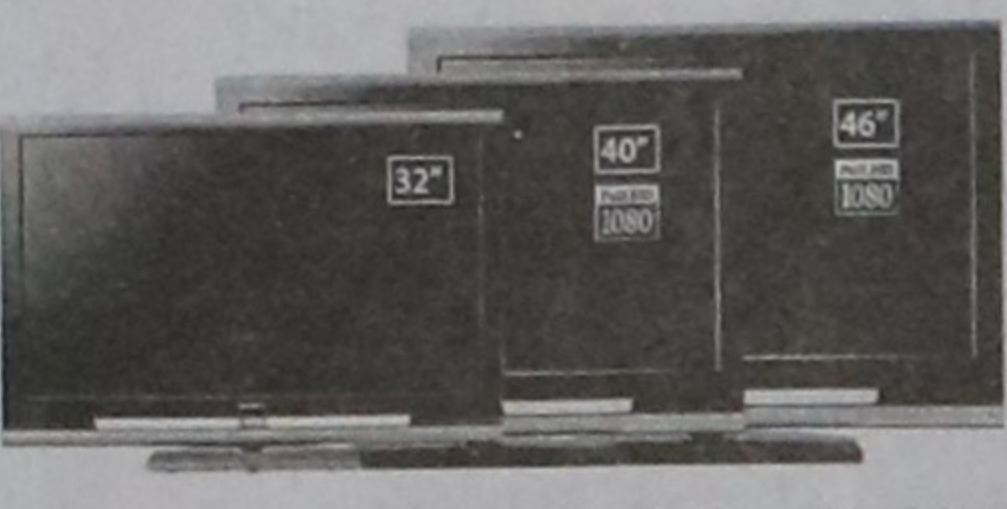
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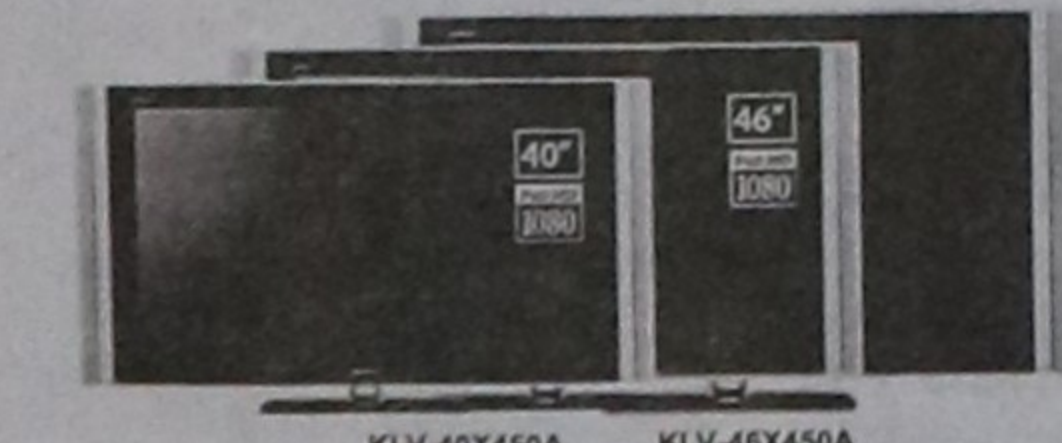
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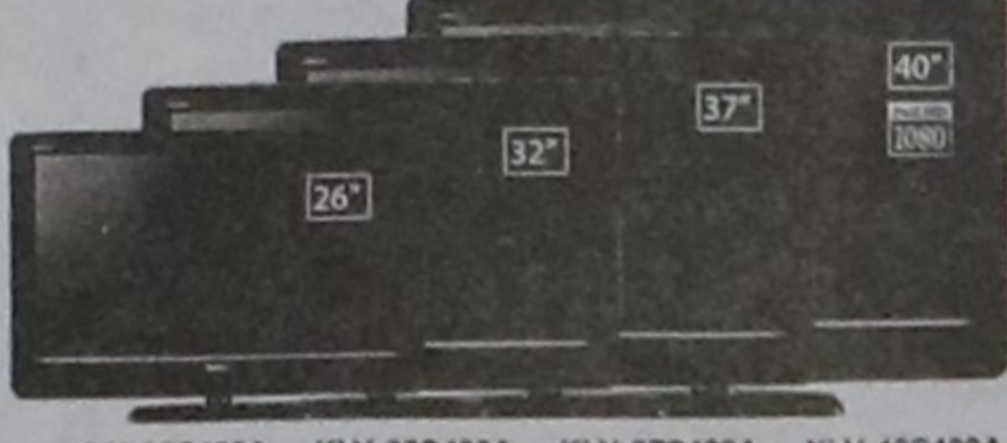
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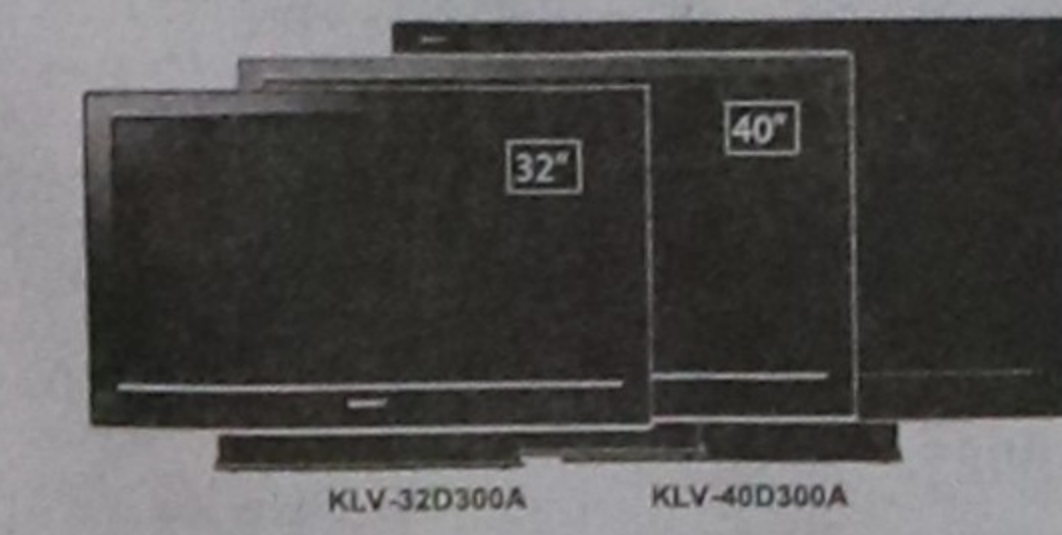
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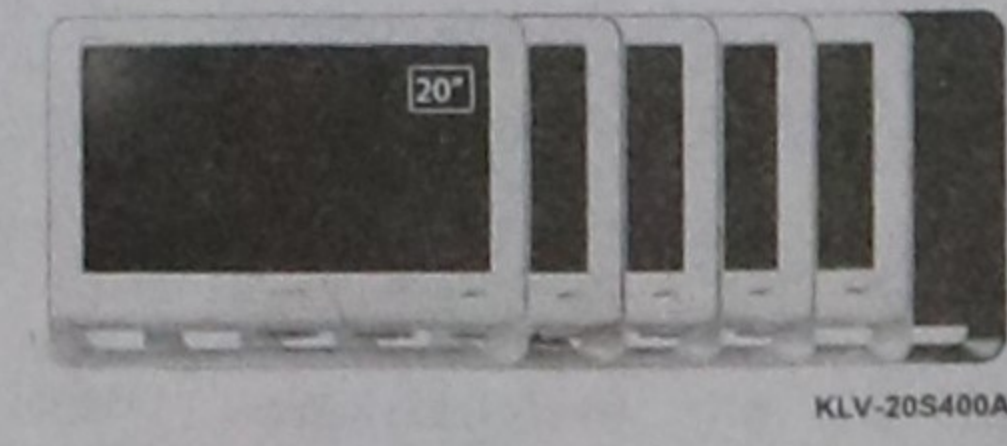
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