

UN rights chief speaks of 'war crimes' in Gaza

AFP, Geneva

The UN human rights chief warned a special session of the Human Rights Council on Friday that human rights violations in Gaza and some reported incidents there might warrant prosecutions for war crimes.

"The vicious cycle of provocation and retribution must be brought to an end," Navi Pillay told the council, which was holding a special session on human rights violations in the Palestinian territory.

"Accountability must be ensured for violations of international law," she said, calling for "credible, independent and transparent investigations" as a first step.

"I remind this council that violations of international humanitarian law may constitute war crimes for which individual criminal responsibility may be invoked," she added.

But the council meeting ended without agreement on a resolution after failure to agree on the term of a condemnation of human rights abuses since the Israeli intervention in Gaza.

The session is expected to decide

Monday whether or not to adopt a draft resolution tabled by Cuba, Egypt and Pakistan.

The text seeks the 47-member council's condemnation of the Israeli offensive and of the "grave human rights situation" in Gaza.

The draft resolution tabled late Friday underlined the civilian toll, especially in Gaza, and called for "the immediate cessation of Israeli military attacks" as well as an "end to the launching of crude rockets against Israeli civilians" in a concession to the European Union.

It also demanded that Israel "stop the targeting of civilians and medical facilities and staff" and that border crossings be reopened.

However the council remains deeply split and there was doubt whether an agreed text could emerge by Monday night. Some western countries see the draft as one-sided and said the resolution should condemn human rights violations by both sides and not simply call for a ceasefire.

Pillay called for an independent investigation of the violence, stressing that Israel and Palestinian militants had

an obligation under international humanitarian law to care for the wounded, and to protect ambulances, hospitals, health workers, schools, civilians as well as their homes.

The High Commissioner underscored calls for a ceasefire, warning that rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip on Israel and "retaliatory" air strikes by Israeli forces were "unacceptable."

"The situation is intolerable," she said, warning that the overall conditions for civilians "constitute egregious violations of human rights."

But Pillay went further, enumerating more evidence of violations of international humanitarian law from the UN agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross, after civilians and relief workers were killed or wounded during Israeli attacks.

The meeting comes on the heels of the UN Security Council's near unanimous approval on Thursday of a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire and the unimpeded provision throughout Gaza of humanitarian assistance.

However, Hamas later rejected that resolution, and Israel followed by rejecting a ceasefire.



A picture shows smoke and fire from Israeli artillery shells over the Gaza Strip town of Jabalia on Friday as seen from Gaza City. Israel vowed to keep up its offensive in the Gaza Strip despite a UN resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire.



Palestinian boys walk past a destroyed building in al-Zeitun neighbourhood following Israeli strikes in Gaza City yesterday. Israeli troops battled Hamas fighters in Gaza into a third week Saturday as both sides ignored a UN Security Council demand to end the fighting that has killed more than 800 people.

Eight family members killed in Israeli strike

AFP, Gaza City

Eight members of the same Palestinian family, including a 12-year-old, were killed on Saturday by Israeli fire in the northern town of Jabalya, medics and witnesses said.

Six other members of the Abed Rabbo family were wounded, according to medics from Kamel Adune hospital.

"We were at home when the bombing started," Umm Mohammed told AFP from inside the hospital. "We fled towards another house and the tanks started firing. Several of us were hit."

Israeli forces killed at least 22 people on Saturday, according to Dr Muawiya Hassanein, the head of Gaza emergency services, as warplanes launched over 40 air strikes across the territory overnight into Saturday.

'Aggression' must stop Says Palestinian leader

AP, Cairo

The Palestinian Authority president urged both Israel and Hamas to agree to an Egypt-brokered truce Saturday, but he singled out the Jewish state, saying it would be responsible for a "waterfall of blood" if it didn't accept the deal.

Mahmoud Abbas was in Cairo Saturday for talks with Egyptian officials on a truce to end the fighting in the Gaza Strip, now in its 15th day. In a news conference Saturday after meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Mahmoud Abbas stressed that there was no time to waste in ending the bloodshed in Gaza, home to 1.4 million people.

"If any party does not accept it (the truce), regrettably it will be the one bearing the responsibility, and if Israel doesn't want to accept, it will take the responsibility of perpetuating a waterfall of blood," Abbas said.

The Palestinian leader also said he hopes the militant group Hamas, which controls Gaza, will be able to reach an agreement to end the fighting, without "hesitation." Abbas said that so far, he has not heard any serious reservations from Hamas on the Egyptian proposal.

Hamas officials from both Gaza and Syria are also in Cairo for separate talks with Egyptian officials on a truce. Israeli officials visited Cairo earlier this week.

Hamas and Abbas's Fatah party, which is dominant in the West Bank, are fierce political rivals. Hamas violently took over control of the

Gaza Strip in 2007, and the Palestinian Authority has no control or power in the coastal strip.

The Israeli offensive in Gaza started Dec. 27. Israel has said that the offensive is designed to stop Hamas rocket fire into Israel. So far, more than 750 Palestinians and 13 Israelis have died since the fighting began.

Abbas said that there is no time to lose in implementing a peace deal and said that the Egyptian proposal, put forward earlier this week by Mubarak at a news conference with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, is the only way forward.

Egypt's plan calls for a temporary cease-fire to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza that would hopefully lead to a more long-term cease-fire, negotiations on the underlying problems that led to the fighting including how to lift the siege of Gaza and securing the borders, and then talks between the warring Palestinian factions aimed at coming up with a unity government.

Both Hamas and Israel have ignored a resolution from the UN Security Council calling for an immediate cease-fire.

Germany's Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who also met Saturday with Mubarak, later praised Egypt's efforts at ending the bloodshed. He said that the U.N. resolution is an important step but the resolution alone has not been enough to end the fighting. He stressed that conditions in Gaza are deteriorating.

Muslim world expresses anger at Gaza assault

AFP, Alexandria

Ten of thousands of Muslims took to the streets Friday from Jakarta to Nouakchott to demonstrate their anger at the Israeli action in Gaza, with the biggest protest taking place in neighbouring Egypt.

More than 50,000 Egyptians rallied after Friday prayers to condemn the assault against Hamas as protests, sometimes violent, took place in other parts of the Muslim world.

Legislators affiliated with the opposition Muslim Brotherhood led the demonstration in the ancient Mediterranean port city of Alexandria, which echoed to such slogans as "Down with Israel and with every collaborator."

The anger was directed not only at the Jewish state, but at Arab regimes deemed to be complicit in the ongoing Israeli blockade of Gaza that has stopped refugees from getting out and humanitarian aid from getting in.

"Gaza, excuse us -- opening Rafah is not in our hands," went another slogan, referring to the Gaza-Egyptian border crossing that President Hosni Mubarak's government in Cairo is refusing to keep open permanently.

A security official put the turnout at 50,000. Riot police were seen trying to prevent the demonstration from taking place -- only to give up because of the sheer numbers of protesters.

In the West Bank city of Ramallah, fights broke out between supporters of Hamas and the rival Fatah faction during a "day of wrath" protest, prompting police to intervene with tear gas and baton charges.

Some 3,000 demonstrated at the behest of Hamas in Hebron, throwing stones at Israeli soldiers who responded with rubber bullets. Several thousand meanwhile shouted "Death to Israel" in Nablus, while young Palestinians clashed with police in Jerusalem.

Thousands rallied in Doha, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain and Kuwait.

UN to resume aid distribution

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations has decided to resume aid distribution for embattled Palestinians in the Gaza Strip after receiving security assurances from Israel, the world body announced.

The news came in a joint statement late Friday by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process.

They said the United Nations had received "credible assurances that the security of UN personnel, installations and humanitarian operations would be fully respected."

"On this basis, UN staff movements suspended yesterday will resume as soon as

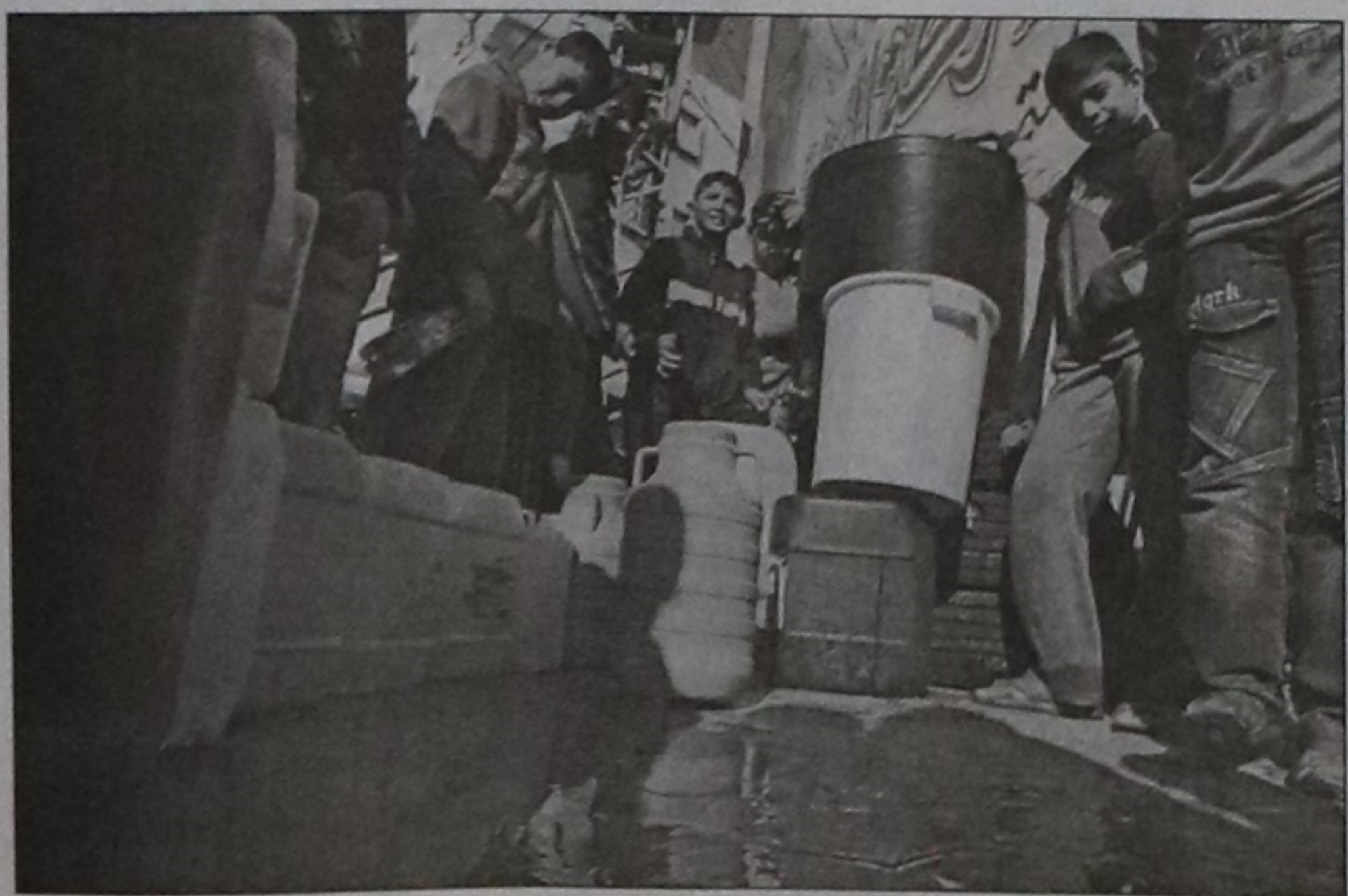
possible," the two organisations said.

UNRWA suspended operations in the enclave on Thursday after a UN convoy was hit by two Israeli tank shells, killing one UN contract driver and wounding a second.

The International Committee of the Red Cross also restricted its Gaza operations after one of its vehicles was hit, apparently by Israeli fire.

At a high-level meeting Friday at the defence ministry in Tel Aviv, Israel "deeply regretted" the incidents and said they did not reflect official government policy, UN officials said.

At that meeting the UN officials also received assurances regarding their future security.



Palestinian children fill canisters with water in the Zeitun district of Gaza City yesterday. The United Nations has decided to resume aid distribution for embattled Palestinians in the Gaza Strip after receiving security assurances from Israel, the world body announced.

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