

Israel not respecting HR laws: EU commissioner

Red Cross chief seeks protection for medics

AFP, Brussels/Gaza City

Israel is not respecting international human rights law in the Gaza Strip, where it is giving insufficient protection to the civil population, an EU commissioner said in comments published Tuesday.

"The evidence, which experts agree on and denounce, shows that Israel is not respecting international human rights laws," the EU's Humanitarian Aid Commissioner Louis Michel told the Belgian daily La Libre Belgique.

"The first obligation is that an occupying power must preserve the lives of the population, protect them, feed them and look after them. That is manifestly not the case" and "I can't accept it," Michel said.

The comments came as the Israeli army embarked on the 18th day of its offensive against Hamas militants in the Palestinian Gaza Strip.

The fighting has left more than 900 dead including significant numbers of

Palestinian women and children. "It's even more difficult to accept when it comes from a democracy," like the Jewish state, the Belgian EU commissioner said.

In his comments Michel appeared to distance himself from the decision by the European Union last month to intensify relations with Israel, a move denounced at the time by the Palestinian Authority.

"We must be careful not to use instruments which could boost one of the two parties, the idea that we are not capable of a balanced approach," said Michel.

Meanwhile, International Committee of the Red Cross chief Jakob Kellenberger yesterday called for medical workers in Gaza to be protected as he visited the battered territory in the midst of an Israeli war.

"I wanted to see this hospital," he said outside Gaza City's Al-Shifa hospital that, short-staffed and low on supplies, has been straining to handle the wounded from Israel's deadliest offensive on Gaza.

"And I can only say this is really very sad and it hurts a lot when you see what I've just seen. It's absolutely indispensable and not negotiable that (the) medical mission in such a conflict has to be protected," he said.

At least 12 medics have been killed since Israel unleashed its Operation Cast Lead on Hamas in Gaza on December 27.

In all the massive offensive has killed 935 people, including 280 children, and wounded another 4,260, according to Gaza medics.

Kellenberger arrived in Gaza on Tuesday at the start of a three-day visit to Palestinian territories and Israel during which he plans to hold talks with senior Israeli and Palestinian officials.

The ICRC, which has a dual role as a relief agency in conflicts and the guardian of the Geneva Conventions, has been unusually outspoken over the past week about the impact of the fighting on civilians and health workers.



A boy walks past a destroyed building during Israeli strikes in Gaza City yesterday. Israeli troops and Palestinian fighters fought fierce battles in the streets of Gaza City early Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP



An explosion is seen behind a mosque after an Israeli airstrike in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah near the border with Egypt yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian divide keeps West Bank calm

AFP, Ramallah

Despite an appeal by Hamas for a third Intifada, few in the West Bank appear to have much appetite for a new uprising in a mark of deep Palestinian divide and growing disenchantment with their leaders.

The first Intifada erupted throughout the Palestinian territories in 1987 as anger at 20 years of occupation boiled over after six residents of Gaza's Jabaliya refugee camp were run over and killed by an Israeli army vehicle.

But although the death toll from Operation Cast Lead is fast approaching the 1,000 mark, making it the deadliest ever Israeli offensive on the tiny strip of land, there have been no large-scale protests in the West Bank despite appeals by Hamas supreme Khaled Meshaal.

Neither has there been, aside from isolated incidents, an outpouring of attacks on Israeli targets.

"The Palestinian population no longer has any confidence in its national leaders, that's why there has been no mass mobilisation against the Israeli operation in Gaza," said Bassam al-Salhi, a leader of the Popular party, which were formerly known as the communists.

Salhi said the public's disillusionment with their politicians stemmed in large part from their seemingly endless feuds.

UN chief demands immediate truce

AFP, AP, United Nations

UN chief Ban Ki-moon on Monday demanded an immediate end to the fighting in the Gaza Strip, as he embarked on Middle East tour in hopes of speeding a truce between Israel and Hamas.

Ban heads to the Mideast on Tuesday to step up diplomatic efforts to get Israel and Hamas to adhere to a UN ceasefire resolution in the Gaza Strip and allow humanitarian aid into the devastated Palestinian territory.

But he said phone calls aren't a substitute for direct talks with leaders who have influence on the parties.

"My message is simple, direct and to the point: the fighting must stop," Ban said in his first press conference of the year.

"Too many people have died," he added.

"There has been too much civilian suffering." "In Gaza, the very foundation of society is being destroyed: people's homes, civic infra-

structure, public health facilities and schools," the Secretary General said.

Ban insisted that the call by the UN Security Council last week for an immediate Gaza ceasefire, which both Israel and Hamas have ignored thus far "must be observed."

"We have a Security Council resolution demanding an immediate and enduring ceasefire. This resolution must be observed," he declared.

The UN chief was to leave Tuesday for his Middle East tour that will also take him to Israel, the West Bank city of Ramallah, Jordan, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Kuwait, where he was to attend an Arab League summit next Monday.

"The primary objective of the (Ban) visit is a ceasefire and the protection of the civilians in Gaza," UN spokeswoman Michele Montas earlier told a press briefing.

Egypt was holding separate meetings in Cairo with both Hamas and the Israelis, which Ban said he hoped would bear fruit.

All weapons legal: Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army on Monday insisted all weapons being used in its Gaza war were within the bounds of international law amid accusations it was using white phosphorus and other deadly munitions.

Medics in Gaza say they have treated more than 50 people suffering burns caused by controversial white phosphorus shells, a claim backed up by a report of the New York-based Human Rights Watch.

And two Norwegian doctors, recently returned from working in the Gaza Strip, accused Israel of using the territory as a testing ground for a new "extremely nasty" type of explosive.

An army spokesman refused to confirm or deny claims it was using white phosphorus, saying: "All weapons used by the IDF (Israel Defence Forces) are in accordance with international law."

"We are only using what is being used by other Western armies -- we are not using anything out of the ordinary," he said.

The controversy surrounding the nature of

weapons being used by the Israeli army stepped up a notch on Monday when the two medics said they had seen clear signs that DIME explosives, a new experimental kind of weapon, were being used in Gaza.

According to Mads Gilbert, the two had seen evidence of a number of "very brutal amputations... without shrapnel injuries" -- injuries, which were likely to have been caused by such a weapon.

An army spokeswoman said she was "not aware of this type of weapon" and reiterated claims that all weapons used by the military were legal.

Mark Regev, spokesman for Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, said Israel was only using legal weapons of the type used by other Western armies.

"Israel military forces only use munitions that are acceptable under international law and international convention," he said.

"The type of munitions used by Israel are similar, if not identical, to munitions used by other Western democracies, including Nato members."

Ministers voice fears Gaza will radicalise British Muslims

AFP, London

Government ministers expressed concern Monday that Israel's military campaign in Gaza was radicalising Muslims in Britain.

Communities Secretary Hazel Blears said she was "very concerned" that the conflict could help extremists, and justice minister Shahid Malik warned it was having a "profoundly acute and unhealthy" effect on Muslim communities here.

"I am very concerned indeed that the events in Gaza could well be used by those people who want to peddle pernicious extremist

views to draw particularly vulnerable young people into that kind of extremism," Blears told the BBC.

"That's why it's doubly important for us now to get the facts across about what our government has done, leading the fight at the UN to get a resolution" calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, she added.

Blears is a key figure in the government's drive to improve relations between Britain's 1.6 million Muslims and non-Muslims which were strained after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States and those in London in 2005.



Palestinian journalists and members of the Red Crescent demonstrate in the West Bank city of Hebron yesterday against the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip. PHOTO: AFP

Biden affirms 'responsible' US pullout from Iraq

AP, Baghdad

Vice President-elect Joe Biden told Iraqi leaders yesterday that the incoming US administration is committed to a responsible troop withdrawal that does not endanger improvements in security, an Iraqi spokesman said.

Biden delivered the message in talks with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on the second day of his visit to Iraq, government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh told The

Associated Press.

President-elect Barack Obama pledged during his election campaign to withdraw all American combat troops from Iraq within 16 months of taking office and shift the focus to Afghanistan to combat a resurgent Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked militants.

Since the November election, however, the US and Iraq have signed a new security agreement that provides for all the more than 140,000 US

troops to leave by 2012, despite concerns among senior US commanders that Iraqi forces might not be ready by then to ensure stability.

Biden, a Democrat from Delaware who has been a frequent visitor to Iraq as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said the agreement sets out a new strategy between Iraq and America, according to al-Dabbagh.

"He said that Obama is committed to withdraw but he

Obama agrees to major US force increase in Afghanistan

AFP, Washington

President-elect Barack Obama intends to sign off on Pentagon plans to send up to 30,000 more US troops to Afghanistan to gain time to review the conflict, the Washington Post reported yesterday.

The new deployments would nearly double the current US force in Afghanistan of 32,000 troops.

According to the Post, which cites unnamed senior Obama team members and Bush administration officials, the goal is not for an Iraq-like "surge" but rather to gain time for a fresh look at US goals and develop a comprehensive new strategy for Afghanistan. Obama, who takes office on January 20, has vowed to boost development in Afghanistan and shift the focus of the "war on terror" from Baghdad to Kabul. A US troop increase in Afghanistan was anticipated.

'Mission accomplished' banner was a mistake Says Bush in his final press conference

AFP, Washington

President George W Bush admitted Monday it had been a mistake to hang a banner saying "mission accomplished" on a US battleship where he declared major combat operations in Iraq over in 2003.

"Clearly, putting a 'mission accomplished' on an aircraft carrier was a mistake," Bush said when asked at what he said would be his final press conference about any errors he had made in his eight years in office.

"It sent the wrong message. We were trying to say something differently but, nevertheless, it conveyed a different

message."

The conflict in Iraq launched with the US-led invasion in March 2003 is now approaching its sixth anniversary and thousands of US troops remain in the country.

"Obviously, some of my rhetoric has been a mistake," Bush said, adding: "I have often said that history will look back and determine that which could have been done better or, you know, mistakes I made."

As Bush prepares to hand over to president-elect Barack Obama on January 20 and return to his home in Texas, he acknowledged he had experienced some let-downs during his two terms in office.

War strains Gazans' survival skills

AP, Gaza City

In 18 days of war, Hisham Abu Ramadan has fallen into a new routine.

He gets up before dawn and goes to his mosque, not just to pray, but to charge his cell phone, since it's the only place in the neighbourhood with a generator. After prayers, he gets in line at a nearby bakery, where as many as 150 people are already waiting to buy bread.

"We've gotten accustomed to this life," said Abu Ramadan, 37.

Others face a tougher time. In Khaled al-Dali's two-room shack in the Shati refugee camp, 21 people half of them relatives who fled the fighting, take turns sleeping because there aren't enough mattresses to go around. Without fuel, the family cooks on fires made from trash. He has sold most of his furniture to buy food.

Gazans have become adept at coping with conflict, including curfews, street clashes and, most recently, severe shortages created by an 18-month border blockade by Israel and Egypt. But Israel's unprecedented assault on Gaza's Hamas rulers with nearly 900 people killed, some 3,400 wounded and tens of thousands displaced has strained even their survival skills.

The massive bombardment has badly disrupted the flow of electricity and water, already stop-and-go before the start of the war. Israel has cut Gaza in half, cutting north and south off from each other.

During the short daylight hours, shoppers crowd the few open stores and outdoor markets in a hunt for scarce goods, from diapers to dairy. At dusk, streets quickly become deserted as civilians retreat indoors, for fear of being mistaken for militants by Israel's military.

"Everything is difficult now eating, drinking, moving," said Mohammed Saleimeh, 26. When electricity comes on in the Nusseirat refugee camp in central Gaza, the women in his 20-member family rush to bake bread. When water comes on, they wash the cloth diapers they now use instead of disposable ones.

In southern Israel, Hamas rocket barrages

have also severely disrupted life, sending people rushing into shelters when air raid sirens go off. Many businesses have closed and classes have been suspended, but residents have adequate supplies of food, electricity and fuel.

In Gaza, the ability to cope largely depends on how much of a buffer, in food and cash, families had going into the war, and in part on their ties to Gaza's Hamas rulers.

Mohammed Awad, a senior Hamas official, told the movement's Al Aqsa TV on Sunday that 25,000 people on the Hamas payroll, from police to civil servants, have received their December salaries.

Hamas members said the money is being paid in cash, with Hamas activists making the rounds to distribute it. A man with a trimmed beard was seen handing out money from a suitcase in the hallway of a building in one Gaza City neighbourhood, then asking employees to sign a receipt.

Abu Ramadan is a former member of the security forces ousted during Hamas' violent takeover of Gaza in June 2007, and still draws his salary from Hamas' rival, the West Bank government of moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. He can still afford to buy drinking water and fill up the tank on the roof of his high-rise in the Sheikh Radwan neighbourhood of Gaza City.

But electricity outages are constant power came on Sunday for the first time in eight days. So he heads to the mosque each morning to charge his cell phone, instead of praying at home as he did before the war.

His family of five eats lentils, beans and canned foods. Tomatoes are available, but have tripled in price, to 75 cents a pound. Only 20 of 47 bakeries are operating, according to the bakers' union, explaining the long lines for bread.

In the Shati camp, al-Dali, 33, was already broke at the start of the fighting, struggling to feed his wife and seven children, ages 5 through 14. A few days ago, he took in his sister, her husband and 10 children, who fled shelling outside their home close to the border with Israel.



Islamic fighters relax in one of the compounds that used to be occupied by Ethiopian troops during a training exercise in Mogadishu yesterday. Ethiopian forces pulled out on Tuesday from two bases in northern Mogadishu in their first withdrawal from the lawless Somali capital since rolling into the seaside city two years ago. PHOTO: AFP