

UN's Ban Ki Moon comes to the defence of Israel

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A United Nations inquiry concluded that Israel's military forces carried out direct and intentional strikes on its premises during the assault on Gaza earlier this year. Israel was therefore responsible for the deaths and injuries of UN personnel and civilians, as well as extensive damage to its property.

The inquiry, led by Ian Martin, a former secretary general of Amnesty International, found that the Israel Defence Force (IDF) was "involved in varying degrees of negligence or recklessness with regard to United Nations premises and to the safety of United Nations staff and other civilians within those premises, with consequent deaths, injuries, and extensive physical damage and loss of property."

This included:

- The deaths of three young men killed by a single IDF missile strike at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) Asma school in Gaza City.
- The firing of heavy mortar rounds into the UNRWA Jabalia school, injuring seven people sheltering in the school, killing up to 40 people in the immediate vicinity and injuring a further 50.
- Aerial bombing of the UNRWA Bureij health centre on the same day, causing the death of a patient, serious injuries to two other patients and injuries to nine of the health centre's employees.
- Small arms firing on a UNRWA convoy in Ezbet Abed Rabou, leading to a temporary suspension of its transport, and disruption of its humanitarian operations.
- Artillery firing by the IDF into the UNRWA field office compound in Gaza city, combined with the use of white phosphorous, causing injuries and considerable damage to it and the surrounding buildings, and leading to the disruption of the UN's humanitarian operations in Gaza.

- Artillery firing by the IDF into the UNRWA Beit Lahia school, again with the use of white phosphorous, causing the deaths of two children and the injuries to 13 others.

- Aerial bombing by the IDF of the Unesco compound, causing damage to UN buildings and vehicles.

The report accused Israeli forces of repeatedly breaching the principle that "UN personnel and all civilians within UN premises, as well as civilians in the immediate vicinity of those premises, are to be protected in accordance with the rules and principles of international humanitarian law."

It found no evidence that Hamas militants had used UN property to attack Israel or the IDF and demanded that the UN urge Israel to retract its allegations that Palestinians had fired from two UN run buildings.

Despite the gravity of these findings, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon bowed to pressure from the United States and Israel, and moved swiftly to try and draw a line under the whole affair.

He rejected—without any explanation—the inquiry's key recommendation that there should be a broader investigation into Israel's conduct during the assault on Gaza and allegations of violations of international humanitarian law, including its use of white phosphorous. Instead, he would seek \$10.4 million compensation from Israel for damage to UN property.

Ban's response is symptomatic of the UN's subservience to the imperialist powers in general and the US in particular, and thus to Israel, Washington's client state and policeman in the Middle East.

Set up by the victors after World War II to replace the defunct League of Nations, the UN gave the power of veto to the five permanent members of the Security Council—US, Britain, France, Russia (the Soviet Union

before 1991) and China (Taiwan before 1971). Since 1972, Washington has repeatedly used its veto to shield Israel from international criticism—and the threat of veto to close down discussion. About half of all its vetoes were used in the explicit defence of Israel.

Since the 1967 War, there have been six major resolutions (242, 338, 1397, 1515, 1850 and 1860) setting out the basis for the resolution of the long running conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. There have been countless resolutions condemning Israel's actions against the Palestinians, demanding a halt to settlement activity in East Jerusalem and the occupied territories and its human rights violations. Each and every one of them has been a dead letter. There have never been any attempts to implement them, much less sanction Israel for non-compliance.

Occasionally, the UN has been forced to denounce Israel when either its actions were particularly egregious or its own interests were at stake. But the US always steps in to mitigate the impact.

In 1996, Washington tried to prevent the publication of a report that accused Israel of shelling a UN base at Qana in Lebanon, killing more than 100 civilians sheltering there. Shortly afterwards, the Clinton administration vetoed a second term for Boutros Boutros Ghali of Egypt, the then UN Secretary General who had commissioned the report.

In 2002, Israeli opposition forced the then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, to abandon plans for a Security Council investigation into the IDF's conduct in its assault on Jenin in March 2002.

This latest inquiry was forced upon Ban as international concern over Israel's disproportionate and massive use of force against an essentially unarmed population mounted. Israel's 22-day offensive against a largely defenceless population killed 1,400 people, the majority of them civilians, including 400 women and children, injured at least 5,000 people, and destroyed 21,000 homes. Israel suffered only 13 deaths, and several of these were by "friendly fire."

Even then, Ban did everything he could to limit its remit and impact. He restricted its terms of reference to include only those attacks on UN property and personnel, since this undermined the authority of the UN itself. Even then he named just nine such incidents. Yet, as the inquiry notes, there were attacks on 36 of UNRWA schools, five of which were being used as

temporary shelters at the time, seven of the 17 UNRWA health centres and two of the 11 UNRWA distribution centres, leading to deaths, injuries and extensive physical damage.

Neither the 184-page report, nor its 27-page summary is available on the UN website. The full report has not been published, while the summary was produced, not by the inquiry team but by the secretary general and given to journalists at his press conference.

The release of the inquiry's findings was delayed for several days as Ban sought to water-down the report. He made every effort to accommodate Israel's sensibilities. He thanked Israel in the most obsequious terms for its co-operation in the inquiry. He made a point—urged on him by Israeli ministers and officials—of speaking out against "continued and indiscriminate" attacks by Hamas. But above all, he said what they wanted to hear: "I do not plan any further enquiries."

This time, rather than wait for the US to veto any further action against Israel, Ban himself ruled out any further action that might lead to Israel being charged with war crimes.

Despite his best efforts to appease Israel, the government of Binyamin Netanyahu rejected the report's findings. A spokesman for Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman of the far right Yisrael Beiteinu condemned the report as "unbalanced, biased and oblivious to the facts... It has preferred the claims of Hamas, a murderous terror organisation, and by doing so has misled the world."

Defence Secretary Ehud Barak of Labour repeated his absurd claim that Israel has "the most moral army in the world" and laid full responsibility for casualties on Hamas.



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