

UN expert speaks in New Zealand on Israel's genocidal war against Palestinians

Tom Peters

22 November 2023

Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories, visited New Zealand earlier this week and addressed public meetings in Auckland and Wellington. An expert on international human rights law, Albanese spoke about the background to the events of October 7, Israel's genocidal war against the people of Gaza and its systematic brutalisation and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

The meetings attracted hundreds of people, many of whom had followed Albanese's previous visit to Australia where she exposed the complicity of the media and the Labor government in supporting Israel's destruction of the Gaza Strip and mass murder of tens of thousands of people. More than 14,500 people have been killed by Israel, including more than 6,000 children.

At the Auckland meeting on Monday, Albanese was applauded when she criticised outgoing Prime Minister Chris Hipkins, who called for a ceasefire the day before in his capacity as Labour Party leader, but not as leader of the government. The incoming National Party-led government has rejected calls for a ceasefire by mass protests in New Zealand and internationally.

At the Wellington event on Tuesday, Albanese condemned Hamas's military attack on October 7 and expressed sympathy for everyone affected. She called for the release of those detained in Gaza by Hamas.

The military retaliation by Israel, however, was "completely out of control." While the US and its allies, including the Labour government in New Zealand, repeatedly insist that Israel has "the right to self-defence," Albanese explained that it had no right to do so using military force, "which under international law is only allowed against another state."

"Self-defence cannot be invoked, so a war cannot be waged, against a population under occupation... Gaza is occupied and so are the Palestinians inside Gaza. Not only have they been occupied, but they have been under an illegal blockade which was already unlawful, which was already collective punishment, already a war crime before the 7th of

October."

Albanese added that even if Israel had such a right to wage war, "there are basic principles in international law of distinction, so civilians cannot be targeted. Bombing a refugee camp where there are 400 residents, including hostages, because Israel had to kill one person—this is not respecting the principle of distinction. In fact, it can constitute a crime of extermination because there is the intentional assumption that those 400 civilians can be killed or harmed."

Israel has dropped "6,000 bombs a week over this strip of land of 360 [square] kilometres, where 2.2 million are crammed, half of them children—40 percent of the population of Gaza is not even 15. What kind of distinction could 6000 bombs per week make?"

In addition, Albanese explained that there was no military target. Israel began its operation by saying, "let's eradicate Hamas, not necessarily Hamas's military capability... and then the language has worsened: flatten Gaza, erase Gaza from Earth, wipe out Gaza. The level of dehumanisation has increased and increased. Palestinians [were] being called human animals, and then someone says: no, not even animals, because if you call them animals, you're insulting the animals. And then babies are associated with or called terrorists. The discourse has become genocidal."

She described the catastrophic situation facing the people of Gaza, where in addition to non-stop bombing there is "no food, no medicine, no aid, no fuel, people drinking seawater. People in UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency] schools with one toilet for 300 people. The sewerage system has collapsed and disease is spreading."

Albanese noted that soldiers entering Gaza have been openly "telling the world what they are doing: they say we came here with instructions: destroy, displace and settle... Israeli soldiers are planting Israeli flags everywhere in the north of Gaza Strip, while people are still rotting under the rubble." She also referred to a recent article in the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* by retired general Giora Eiland who said the spread of disease "will bring victory closer."

“What is being done reflects this [genocidal] intent, because half of the Gaza Strip has been [almost] completely emptied... 1.6 million people have been displaced to the south while the south is still being bombed.”

She praised the “minority of Israeli Jews who stand against this... They are being threatened themselves, and risking their lives themselves, and still continue to do an honourable job.”

Albanese explained that a process of ethnic cleansing is also underway in the occupied West Bank. “In 40 days, 200 Palestinians have been killed by soldiers and settlers. [Minister of National Security] Ben-Gvir has been giving weapons and licence to kill any Palestinian to Israeli armed settlers... 50 kids have been killed, refugee camps like Jenin and Balata have been bombed by airplanes and tanks again and again ... There is no threat, there is no Hamas military presence, and still Palestinians are being told to leave to Jordan.”

She described the regime of apartheid and continual, daily atrocities inflicted on Palestinian people for decades leading up to October 7. Under military regulations in the West Bank, “participating in a gathering of 10 or more people where a political issue is discussed by the Palestinians, without the authorisation of the army, can lead to 10 years in jail. Living in an area that is declared closed by the military can lead to 7 years in jail: 60 percent of the land in the West Bank is directly controlled by Israel and one third of this is declared a military area.”

Children were frequently abducted from their homes “on the allegation that they’ve thrown stones, which leads to 20 years in jail if the stone has been thrown with the intent to harm, including at a tank.” In such cases, children were “held in solitary confinement during the entire interrogation until they confess what they have done or until they give names of ... the ‘security threat’ in the village. The solitary confinement on average lasts 16 days during which the child cannot see legal counsel or a parent.”

Albanese compared the present situation with the 1947-49 Nakba [catastrophe] in which the state of Israel was established through the dispossession and expulsion of 750,000 Palestinian people, driven from their homes and subjected to massacres and the destruction of villages by Israeli forces. Hundreds of thousands more people were displaced in the 1967 war, when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza.

She said the world faced “a watershed moment. This is where we, as a people, can say: enough. Because we have not been able to stop atrocity crimes and genocide before, in Rwanda, in Sudan, in Myanmar, in Bosnia, but we have the responsibility to do that now because a genocide might be unfolding and must be stopped.”

Following Albanese’s talk, an audience member from the West Bank city of Nablus, who moved to New Zealand 10 years ago, said: “It struck me that we used to believe that in a democracy, people dictate to the government what to do. But what I [saw] in the last 45 days shows that this is not true.”

Pointing to the mass protests that have unfolded demanding a ceasefire, he said, “the government is completely disconnected from the public opinion. Is this because they have been bullied by superpowers? Or is it because, when it comes to Israel, the normal laws don’t apply?”

Albanese replied that “international law is as strong as the will of states to enforce it and there has been very little appetite, for a number of reasons, to do that. A number of reasons that are historical, political, and economic.” She reiterated her support for protests and other actions to demand justice and equal rights for Palestinian people across Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Speaking after the meeting to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Albanese endorsed the call by Palestinian trade unions for strikes and other action to stop the shipment of weapons to the Israeli military. “I think it makes sense, especially at a moment like now where it’s clear that atrocity crimes are being committed. So, it was meaningful to do that before the 7th of October and it’s a moral and legal imperative to do that now.”

Albanese also denounced the efforts by several governments to ban or delegitimise protests opposing Israel’s genocide. “This is criminal, because freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, the right to protest, these are rights that are recognised and protected under the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and cannot be infringed upon. In many European countries they are also constitutional rights.

“So we need, first and foremost, we need to act in solidarity with the Palestinian people, but also with the many Israelis who stand with them against the occupation, against apartheid, and against what might really look like a genocide. But it’s also for our own rights and freedoms that are being crushed.”



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