NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

UN suspends Gaza aid as tension with Israel rises

Linda Cooper James Hodge | Jan. 8, 2009

After Israeli tank fire killed a U.N. worker purportedly during a cease-fire, the United Nations suspended its aid operations in Gaza Jan. 8 until the safety of its staff is guaranteed. It?s the latest in a series of events that have raised tensions between U.N. and Israeli officials and led U.N. General Assembly President Miguel d?Escoto to call the Israeli offensive a ?monstrosity.?

Meanwhile, the International Red Cross has charged that the Israeli military failed in ?its obligation under international humanitarian law to care for and evacuate the wounded? after its workers found four small Palestinian children next to their dead mothers, too weak to stand up on their own.

U.N. relief operations spokesman Chris Gunness said: "Our installations have been hit, our workers have been killed in spite of the fact that the Israeli authorities have the co-ordinates of our facilities and that all our movements are co-coordinated with the Israeli army.?

The U.N. said it stopped its refugee operations after Israeli strikes killed a driver on the 13th day of an offensive launched with the stated aim of ending Hamas militant rocket attacks into Israel.?

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the strikes ?took place during the three-hour humanitarian lull announced by the IDF [Israeli Defence Forces]."

Two days earlier Israeli shelling killed more than 40 Palestians at a U.N. school in the Jabalya refugee camp. Israel said it was returning fire from the area, but U.N. officials said there were no Hamas or other militants inside the school.

Meanwhile, the International Committee of the Red Cross issued a statement saying that on Jan. 7, after four days of trying, it managed to get access ?to several houses in the Zaytun neighborhood of Gaza City that had been affected by Israeli shelling.?

The Red Cross said they found four small children next to their dead mothers in one of the houses: ?They were too weak to stand up on their own. One man was also found alive, too weak to stand up. In all there were at least 12 corpses lying on mattresses.?

In another house, the Red Cross said, the team found ?15 other survivors of this attack including several

wounded. In yet another house, they found an additional three corpses. Israeli soldiers posted at a military position some 80 meters away from this house ordered the rescue team to leave the area which they refused to do. There were several other positions of the Israel Defense Forces nearby as well as two tanks.?

"This is a shocking incident," said Pierre Wettach, the ICRC's head of delegation for Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. "The Israeli military must have been aware of the situation but did not assist the wounded. Neither did they make it possible for us or the Palestine Red Crescent to assist the wounded."

The Israeli government did not immediately respond to the charges, but in the past it has said it works with aid groups to ensure civilians get assistance.

The latest tensions between U.N. and Israeli officials began even before the offensive, which has so far killed more than 700 Palestinians and 11 Israelis.

Since becoming UN General Assembly President last fall, d?Escoto - a Maryknoll priest from Nicaragua - has criticized both the Israeli?s treatment of Palestinians and the United States? blocking of UN Security Council resolutions dealing with Israel.

The Security Council is made up of 15 members, with five permanent members - China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States, who can block any proposal by casting a lone vote. The powerlessness of the UN to intercede in Gaza, d?Escoto said, shows ?the dysfunctionality of the Security Council."

Earlier, D?Escoto echoed statements by former President Jimmy Carter, in comparing Israel's treatment of the Palestinians to the apartheid policies of South Africa. In a November interview with the Jerusalem Post, d?Escoto said that "Israeli policies in the Palestinian territories appear so similar to the apartheid of an earlier era? We must not be afraid to call something for what it is."

He also said the U.N. should consider "a non-violent campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions to pressure Israel to end its violations.?

A couple of weeks after the interview, d?Escoto began to receive death threats posted on the Internet. About the same time, Israel expelled Richard Falk, a United Nations investigator of human rights in the Palestinian territories and a Jewish professor of international law at Princeton, who has strongly condemned Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. Israel said it has welcomed visits by other U.N. investigators, but questioned Falk?s objectivity, citing his "vehement publications."

Another flare-up came when Israel's U.N. Ambassador Gabriela Shalev was quoted by the Jerusalem Post as saying D'Escoto tried to block her participation in the 60th anniversary commemoration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a charge d?Escoto calls slanderous.

That was the situation in late December when Palestinian militants in Gaza began firing rockets into Israel, triggering Israel?s air strikes on Dec. 27, which killed at least 230 Palestinians.

D?Escoto condemned the bombing, saying the U.N. should take firm action if it ?does not want to be rightly accused of complicity by omission.?

In a written statement, d?Escoto said, the airstrikes represent severe violations of international humanitarian law as defined in the Geneva Conventions. These, he said, included ?collective punishment ? the entire 1.5 million people who live in the crowded Gaza Strip are being punished for the actions of a few militants; targeting civilians ? the airstrikes were aimed at civilian areas in one of the most crowded stretches of land in the world;

disproportionate military response ? the airstrikes have not only destroyed every police and security office of Gaza?s elected government, but have killed and injured hundreds of civilians.?

Mirit Cohen, spokeswoman for Israel's mission to the United Nations, charges that d?Escoto has abused his position.

In remarks published by the Reuters news agency, Cohen said that "The role of the president of the General Assembly should be to unite the international community and promote shared interests and values. However, since his first days as president of the General Assembly, Mr. D'Escoto has been divisive and controversial, abusing his position.?

Israel has also chided a senior Vatican official, Cardinal Renato Martino, for saying that the conditions in Gaza "increasingly resemble a big concentration camp."

Israeli Foreign ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor said Martino?s remarks seemed ?to be based on Hamas propaganda while ignoring its numerous crimes.?

Linda Cooper and Jim Hodge are NCR *regular contributors.*

Source URL (retrieved on *09/17/2014 - 02:33*): http://ncronline.org/news/un-suspends-gaza-aid-tension-israel-rises