

Palestinian rights groups urge swift action after ICC ruling

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Ramallah, February 9 (RHC)-- Palestinian rights groups have welcomed the International Criminal Court's ruling that it has jurisdiction over the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories and called on the court's prosecutor Fatou Bensouda to take swift action.

The ruling opens the way for the ICC to investigate alleged war crimes committed in the 2014 Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the besieged Gaza Strip by both the Israeli army and Palestinian armed factions.

The 50-day war, which devastated the coastal enclave and left 2,251 dead on the Palestinian side, mostly civilians, and 74 on the Israeli side, mostly soldiers, has already been the subject of a five-year preliminary ICC probe and a string of critical reports.

Bensouda said in December 2019 there was "a reasonable basis to believe that war crimes have been or are being committed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip." She named the Israeli army and armed Palestinian groups such as Hamas as possible perpetrators and asked judges to rule on whether the situation fell under the court's jurisdiction, before a formal investigation would be opened. The new ruling clears the way for Bensouda to investigate alleged atrocities.

Several Palestinian rights groups praised the ICC's "landmark decision", and stressed that immediate action must be taken by Bensouda in order to "ensure justice and accountability for Palestinian victims".

"A critically important step towards ensuring the rule of law, the decision also marks an important step towards ending impunity, while ensuring the dignity of the Palestinian people," read a statement by rights groups Al-Haq, Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, Palestinian Center for Human Rights and Al Dameer Association for Human Rights.

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement also welcomed the ICC ruling, and called on the body to "stop dragging its feet, resist pressure from the US, Israel and Western countries, and immediately do its job." "Palestinians cannot afford any more crimes and suffering," BDS said in a statement. "Justice delayed is justice denied. The ICC must hold Israel accountable for its decades of crimes against the Palestinian people."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Saturday denounced the court ruling as "anti-Semitic" and "perversion of justice" and resolved to fight it. Israel, which is not a member of the court, has rejected its jurisdiction. Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh praised the ICC ruling as a "victory for justice and humanity" and Palestinian Foreign Affairs Minister Riyad al-Maliki described Friday as an "historic day."

A Hamas official in Gaza welcomed the ruling and said it did not fear investigation. "Hamas resistance and the resistance of the Palestinian people is legitimate and consistent with International Humanitarian law," said spokesman Hazem Qassem.

Diana Buttu, an international lawyer and former legal adviser to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), said the Palestinians still faced many hurdles. "The road to actual justice is a long one, for the ICC will undoubtedly face political pressure not to proceed," Buttu said.

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