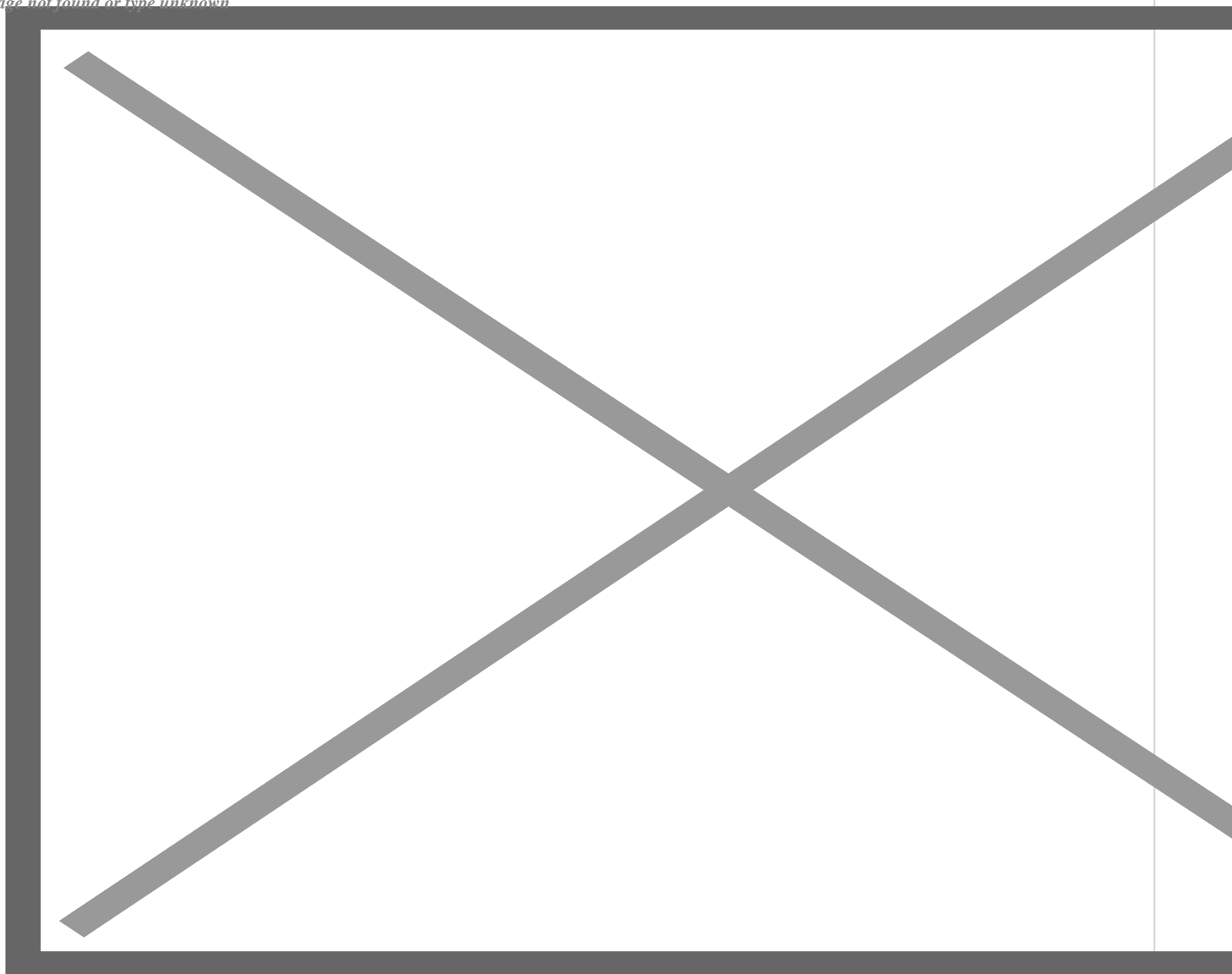


Michelle Bachelet says Israel's Gaza strikes may constitute war crimes

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Bachelet pointed out that governmental buildings, residential homes, international humanitarian organizations, medical facilities and media offices had been hit in the enclave of million people [Fabrice Coffrini /AFP]

Geneva, May 27 (RHC)-- The United Nations human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said on Thursday that Israel's bombardment of besieged Gaza that left at least 253 Palestinian dead may constitute "war crimes" if they are shown to be disproportionate.

Bachelet, opening a special session of the UN Human Rights Council, called at the request of Pakistan -- on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation -- and Palestine, said she had seen no evidence that civilian buildings in Gaza hit by Israeli attacks were being used for military purposes.

"If found disproportionate, such attacks might constitute war crimes," she told the 47-member Geneva forum. She also urged Hamas, which governs Gaza, to refrain from firing rockets indiscriminately on Israeli territory.

The 11-day offensive on the Gaza Strip, which has been under a 14-year-old Israeli blockade, killed at least 253 Palestinians, including 66 children, and wounded more than 1,900 people, the health ministry in Gaza says. At least 12 people were killed in Israel, including three foreign workers and two children.

"Although reportedly targeting members of armed groups and their military infrastructure, the Israeli attacks resulted in extensive civilian deaths and injuries, as well as large-scale destruction and damage to civilian objects," said the UN rights chief, highlighting the scale of the destruction in Gaza.

She pointed out that governmental buildings, residential homes, international humanitarian organisations, medical facilities and media offices had been hit in the enclave of two million people. The UN has dubbed it "the world's largest open-air prison."

"Despite Israel's claims that many of these buildings were hosting armed groups or being used for military purposes, we have not seen evidence in this regard," Bachelet said. "There is no doubt that Israel has the right to defend its citizens and residents," she said. "However, Palestinians have rights too. The same rights."

The 47-member council was debating a draft resolution to launch a broad, international investigation into violations surrounding the latest Gaza violence, but also of "systematic" abuses in the Palestinian territories and inside Israel.

Saleh Hijazi, Middle East and North Africa deputy regional director of Amnesty International, told Al Jazeera he welcomes a draft resolution as a means to "establish an investigative mechanism that collects and preserves evidence that cooperates with the ongoing international criminal court investigation into the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories".

"It is important that these moves tackle arms transfers and lead to a comprehensive arms embargo on Israel and Palestinian armed groups," he said, speaking from the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah. "This is a real test, specifically for the European Union states, to walk the walk when they talk about accountability, to not make Israel an exception when it comes to human rights and respect for international law," he added.

Of the various speakers to address the session was Muna El-Kurd, an activist and journalist from the occupied East Jerusalem neighbourhood Sheikh Jarrah, where a number of families are facing imminent forced displacement from their own homes. "We don't want just your concern, we want you to stop this ethnic cleansing in Sheikh Jarrah and in Palestine," she said.

She went on to describe the imminent forced displacement Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah, including her own, are facing. Half of El-Kurd's own home was taken over by Israeli settlers in 2009, in what she said was a systematic collusion between the Israeli government and settler organisations.

The imminent expulsion of Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah led to widespread protests from Palestinians, which drew harsh Israeli crackdown and raids on Al-Aqsa Mosque – considered the third-holiest site in Islam. Palestinian factions in Gaza, including Hamas, said they fired rockets against Israeli actions in occupied East Jerusalem.

Israel launched the military offensive after the rocket attacks began, but it has been criticised for use of disproportionate force in the Palestinian territory. Riyad al-Maliki, the Palestinian Authority foreign minister, said the failure of the international community to hold Israel accountable for its crimes has only served to encourage it to continue committing them.

“There can be no peace without the end of Israeli occupation,” he said.

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