

Human Rights Watch calls out Israeli attacks on Gaza

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Israeli air attacks on high-rise buildings in Gaza left dozens of people homeless and destroyed scores of businesses, US-based rights group says.

New York, August 23 (RHC)-- Israeli air raids that demolished four high-rise buildings in the besieged Gaza Strip during its assault on the enclave in May apparently violated international laws of war, a leading international human rights group said Monday, calling on the Israeli military to produce evidence justifying the attacks.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted although no one was harmed in the air raids, the attacks damaged neighbouring buildings, left dozens of people homeless, and destroyed scores of businesses.

“The apparently unlawful Israeli strikes on four high-rise towers in Gaza City caused serious, lasting harm for countless Palestinians who lived, worked, shopped or benefited from businesses based there,” said Richard Weir, crisis and conflict researcher for the New York-based group.

“The Israeli military should publicly produce the evidence that it says it relies on to carry out these attacks.” The Israeli military did not immediately respond to the report. But at the time it accused Hamas – the group that governs the enclave – of using the buildings for military purposes and turning their occupants into human shields. However, it provided no evidence to back up its claims.

It was HRW’s third report on the 11-day Israeli offensive, which was marked by its intensity and the targeting of civilian structures. It previously accused Israel of apparent war crimes for attacks it said had no clear military targets but killed dozens of civilians.

Israel’s destruction of Palestinian high-rises was one of its most controversial wartime tactics. Among the targets was the 12-story al-Jalaa building, which housed the local offices of The Associated Press and Al Jazeera. The building was also home to dozens of families.

Israel said the buildings were used by Hamas for military purposes, and in all cases, it ordered occupants to evacuate before the structures were destroyed in what it says was a step to avoid civilian casualties.

Owners and residents of the building said the one-hour notice was not enough to evacuate people, archives, and valuable equipment from the building.

The AP has called on Israel to make public the evidence it used to justify the demolition of the al-Jalaa building. Israel has said Hamas operatives were using the building for a sophisticated effort aimed at disrupting Israel’s Iron Dome rocket defence system but it refused to share its intelligence, saying it did not want to reveal its sources of information.

HRW said it interviewed 18 Palestinians who were either witnesses or victims of the air raids. It said it also reviewed video footage and photos after the attacks, as well as statements by Israeli and Palestinian officials and armed groups.

It said it found no evidence that fighters involved in military operations had a current or long-term presence in the buildings when they were attacked. It also said even if fighters were using the buildings, making them legitimate targets, Israel is obligated to avoid disproportionate harm to civilians.

“The proportionality of the attack is even more questionable because Israeli forces have previously demonstrated the capacity to strike specific floors or parts of structures,” it said.

The May assault was the fourth Israel launched on the Strip since Hamas came to power in Gaza in 2007, a year after winning Palestinian elections. HRW, other rights groups and UN officials have accused both sides of committing war crimes in all of the conflicts.

The Gaza Strip is one of the world’s most densely populated areas, where two million Palestinians – half of them below the age of 18 – live in 365sq km (141sq miles) of the coastal territory.

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