

Red Crescent demands international probe into Israel killing of Gaza medics



Members of the Palestine Red Crescent Society carry the bodies of their fellow paramedics who were killed by Israeli forces in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip [Hatem Khaled/Reuters]

Gaza City, April 9 (RHC)-- The Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) has called for an independent international inquiry into the “deliberate killing” of 15 medical and humanitarian workers in an attack by

Israeli forces in Gaza.

In a statement, the group said the March 23rd attack in Gaza's southern city of Rafah "constitutes a full-fledged war crime, and it reflects a dangerous pattern of repeated violation of international humanitarian law."

Israeli forces opened fire at the medics, who were driving in ambulances to assist wounded people at the site of an earlier Israeli attack.

A video recently recovered from the mobile phone of one of the medics showed their final moments. The medics were wearing highly reflective uniforms and were inside clearly identifiable rescue vehicles before they were shot by Israeli forces in Rafah's Tal as-Sultan neighbourhood.

According to the PRCS, the convoy came under heavy gunfire for about five minutes. It said communication between the team and the central dispatch centre "confirms that the gunfire continued for no less than two hours" with continuous shooting heard until contact was completely lost with one of the medics.

This has also been confirmed by one survivor, who said the ambulances came under direct fire with no warning, according to al-Khatib. The survivor also said he was used by Israeli officers as a "human shield" before being able to escape.

"It is no longer sufficient to speak of respecting the international law and Geneva Convention," al-Khatib told reporters from el-Bireh in the occupied West Bank. "It is now required from the international community and the UN Security Council to implement the necessary punishment against all who are responsible."

Al-Khatib also called on the international community to safeguard aid workers and prevent the targeting of hospitals, medical centres and ambulances. He also requested that Israel disclose the whereabouts of the PRCS staff who are still missing.

The PRCS lost eight of its workers in the attack. Six members of the Palestinian Civil Defence agency and an employee of the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, were also killed.

The Israeli military had claimed its soldiers "did not randomly attack" any ambulances, insisting they fired on "terrorists" approaching them in "suspicious vehicles".

"Several uncoordinated vehicles were identified advancing suspiciously toward [Israeli army] troops without headlights or emergency signals," it said. But al-Khatib refuted this claim, saying the ambulances had emergency lights on.

"We at PRCS have been accustomed to Israel's false allegations and fabricated stories with regards to what goes on in the Gaza Strip," al-Khatib said. "We believe that the whole world, including media representatives, has now come to realize who is telling the truth," he added.

In its statement, the PRCS said the area was not classified as a "red zone" at the time of the emergency response, which means no prior coordination was required to access the site. It said for several days after that, Israeli forces prevented rescue teams from accessing the area under the pretext that it was a "red zone".

Then only limited access was granted, during which PRCS teams recovered the body of a Civil Defence member before Israeli forces forced the rescue team to withdraw, it said.

On March 30, the bodies of 14 others were discovered in a "mass grave in a brutal and degrading manner that violates human dignity", the PRCS added.

The attack was decried by the Civil Defence, Gaza's Government Media Office, Hamas and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk, who said the incident raises concern over possible "war crimes" by the Israeli military.

Meanwhile, Tom Fletcher, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, said that since Israel broke the ceasefire in Gaza on March 18 and resumed its war on the enclave, Israeli air attacks have hit "densely populated areas" with "patients killed in their hospital beds, ambulances shot at, first responders killed".

According to UNRWA, at least 408 aid workers, including more than 280 UNRWA staff members, have been killed by Israeli forces in Gaza since the war began on October 7, 2023.

Gaza's Ministry of Health said that since March 18th, at least 921 people have been killed in the territory, adding to the more than 50,000 killed since the war began – most of them children and women.

The violence pushed the heads of six UN agencies to call on Monday for an immediate renewal of the ceasefire that Israel unilaterally broke and the re-entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza.

[SOURCE: AL JAZEERA and REUTERS]

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