

UN experts affirm Israeli attacks on reproductive healthcare in Gaza are genocidal

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A Palestinian woman bids her grandson Tamer farewell in Deir el-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, after he was killed along with his mother in an Israeli strike [File: Eyad Baba/AFP]

United Nations, March 13 (RHC)-- Israel has carried out “genocidal acts” against Palestinians by systematically destroying women’s healthcare facilities during its war on Gaza and using sexual violence as a war strategy, United Nations experts have said.

On Thursday, the Geneva-based Independent International Commission of Inquiry said in a new report that Israel “intentionally attacked and destroyed” Gaza’s main fertility centre while simultaneously blocking medicine for pregnancies, deliveries and neonatal care from entering the enclave.

In its report, the commission found that Israeli authorities “have destroyed ... the reproductive capacity of Palestinians in Gaza as a group through the systematic destruction of sexual and reproductive healthcare”, it said in a statement.

It added that this amounted to “two categories of genocidal acts” during Israel’s offensive in Gaza, launched after the attacks by Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023. For its part, “Israel categorically rejects the unfounded allegations”, its mission in Geneva said in a statement.

Israel has also accused the commission, which was established in May 2021, of advancing a “predetermined and biased political agenda ... to incriminate the Israel Defense Forces.”

The report said maternity hospitals and wards had been systematically destroyed in Gaza, along with the Al-Basma IVF Centre, the territory’s main in-vitro fertility clinic. It said Al-Basma was intentionally shelled in December 2023, destroying about 4,000 embryos at a clinic that served 2,000-3,000 patients a month.

The commission found no credible evidence that the building was used for military purposes. It noted the destruction “was a measure intended to prevent births among Palestinians in Gaza, which is a genocidal act”.

Speaking to Al Jazeera, the former UN Humanitarian Affairs Coordinator Martin Griffiths said “it’s good that the UN is now talking about genocide, because up to now it’s been very careful about that word.”

And while he said that the evidence for genocide was “incontrovertible” and that the findings were “long overdue”, he steered clear of saying that either the International Court of Justice or the International Criminal Court would bring those accountable to justice.

“Will it be a legally enforced claim? I don’t think so,” he said of the report’s findings.

The report came after the commission conducted public hearings in Geneva on Tuesday and Wednesday, hearing from victims and witnesses of sexual violence. It concluded that Israel had targeted civilian women and girls directly, “acts that constitute the crime against humanity of murder and the war crime of willful killing.”

The commission added that forced public stripping and nudity, sexual harassment including threats of rape, as well as sexual assault, comprise part of the Israeli forces’ “standard operating procedures” towards Palestinians.

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