UN probe says women, children comprise the majority of Gaza war dead

AFP – The UN on Friday condemned the staggering number of civilians killed in Israel's war in Gaza, with women and children comprising nearly 70 percent of the thousands of fatalities it had managed to verify.

In a fresh report, slammed by Israel, the United Nations human rights office (OHCHR) detailed a raft of violations of international law since Hamas's deadly October 7 attack in Israel sparked the war in the Gaza Strip.

Many could amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity and possibly even "genocide", it warned, demanding international efforts to prevent "atrocity crimes" and ensure accountability.

"Civilians in Gaza have borne the brunt of the attacks, including through the initial 'complete siege' of Gaza by Israeli forces," the UN said.

"Conduct by Israeli forces has caused unprecedented levels of killings, death, injury, starvation, illness and disease."

It pointed to "the Israeli government's continuing unlawful failures to allow, facilitate and ensure the entry of humanitarian aid, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, and repeated mass displacement".

Israel's mission to the UN in Geneva "categorically" rejected the report, decrying "the inherent obsession of OHCHR with the demonisation of Israel".

– 'Dystopia of destruction' –

“Gaza is now a rubble-strewn landscape,” Ajith Sunghay, head of the UN rights office’s activities in the Palestinian territories, said via video-link from Amman.

“Within this dystopia of destruction and devastation, those alive are left injured, displaced and starving.”

Friday’s report also found that Hamas and other armed groups had committed widespread violations that could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, including seizing hostages, killings, torture and sexual violence.

Those violations, it said, were especially committed in connection with the October 7, 2023 attack, which resulted in 1,206 deaths, mostly of civilians, according to an AFP tally of official Israeli figures.

– ‘Systematic violation’ –

The report also tackled the contentious issue of the proportion of civilians among the nearly 43,500 people killed in Gaza so far, according to the health ministry in the Palestinian territory.

UN agencies have been relying on death tolls provided by the authorities in Hamas-run Gaza due to lack of access. This has sparked harsh criticism from Israel but the UN has repeatedly said the figures are reliable.

The rights office said it had now managed to verify around 10,000 of the more than 34,500 people reportedly killed during the first six months of the war.

“We have so far found close to 70 percent to be children and women,” Sunghay said, highlighting the stringent verification methodology that requires at least three separate sources.

He said the findings indicated “a systematic violation of the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law”.

He said 4,700 of the verified fatalities were children and 2,461 were women.

– ‘Unprecedented’ –

The Israeli military said it works towards minimising harm to civilians.

“The IDF works to minimize harm to non combatants prior to attacks, especially women and children,” it said in a statement to AFP.

“Every military action is carried out in accordance with the principles of distinction and proportionality, and is preceded by a careful assessment of the potential for civilian harm.”

The rights office found that about 80 percent of all the verified deaths in Gaza had occurred in Israeli attacks on residential buildings or similar housing.

Children between the ages of five and nine made up the largest group of victims, with the youngest victim a one-day-old boy and the oldest a 97-year-old woman, it said.

Israel says its operations in Gaza target militants and are in line with international law.

But Friday’s report stressed that the verified deaths largely mirror Gaza’s demographic makeup rather than that of combatants.

This, it said, clearly “raises concerns regarding compliance with the principle of distinction and reflects an apparent failure to take all feasible precautions to avoid, and in any event to minimise, incidental loss of civilian life”.

UN rights chief Volker Turk called on all countries to work to halt the violations and to ensure accountability, including through universal jurisdiction.

“It is essential that there is due reckoning with respect to the allegations of serious violations of international law through credible and impartial judicial bodies,” he said.

“The violence must stop immediately, the hostages and those arbitrarily detained must be released, and we must focus on flooding Gaza with humanitarian aid.”

AFP