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Israeli Strike of UN Headquarters in Gaza Draws Criticism

Ban, who is in the Middle East on a multi-nation tour, aimed at exerting diplomatic pressure on the parties engaged in the Gaza conflict, demanded a "full explanation" and said the Israeli defense minister told him the attack on the UN facility had been a "grave mistake."

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said the military fired artillery shells at the UN compound after Hamas militants opened fire from the location.

"It is absolutely true that we were attacked from that place, but the consequences are very sad and we apologize for it," Olmert told reporters. "I don't think it should have happened and I'm very sorry."

John Ging, director of UNRWA operations in Gaza, said in a statement quoted by AP writers that the attack at the compound caused a "massive explosion" that injured three people.

In response to an anonymous statement made by a senior Israeli military officer who said that Israeli troops opened fire after Hamas militants inside the UN compound shot anti-tank weapons and machine guns at Israeli troops, Ging, who was in the compound at the time, called the Israeli account "nonsense." He stated that UN officials have provided Israel with GPS coordinates of all UN installations in Gaza.

Secretary-General Ban, after arriving in Israel following a visit to Egypt the preceding day, said that he had made a strong protest to Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak over the shelling of the UNRWA compound.

"The defense minister said to me it was a grave mistake and he took it very seriously. He assured me that extra attention will be paid to UN facilities and staff and this will not be repeated," Ban was quoted by Reuters news service.

Agence France Presse reported that, as a result of the shelling, the UNRWA had suspended its operations in Gaza.

In addition to the UN facility, the Israeli bombardment also struck Gaza's Al-Quds hospital and a high-





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rise building housing the offices of several news media, including Reuters and AP. Reuters reported that its staff was on the phone with the Israeli military, which was asking about the location of its office, shortly before an Israeli shell hit the floor above its offices. An AP spokesperson reported that bullets had struck its office in the same building. As a result of these incidents, the Foreign Press Association in Israel, issued a statement of protest: The FPA rejects and condemns the IDF policy of controlling the news coverage of the events in Gaza. By preventing the entry of foreign journalists into Gaza and bombing buildings housing offices of international media - contrary to IDF assurances that these media buildings would be safe - the IDF is severely violating basic principles of respect for press freedom.

The FPA also asked its members not to use Israeli military photos or footage until it received an official apology for the attacks against the media building.

While all of the facts concerning these incidents of collateral damage in Gaza are not in, it seems unlikely that Israel would risk alienating both the UN *and* the world's media by deliberately firing on their facilities, giving some credence to the Israeli defense minister's statement that striking the UN facility had been a "grave mistake."

Unfortunately, Israel's credibility in such circumstances has undoubtedly been tarnished because of its history of not always taking reasonable care to avoid innocent civilian casualties when retaliating against terrorist attacks, as has repeatedly been demonstrated not only in Gaza, but also in Lebanon and the West Bank.

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