

ARMED CONFLICTS

Israeli forces turn UN-run schools, shelter centres into settings for brutal crimes against civilians



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Israel-Palestinian Territory

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Geneva - The Israeli occupation continues to violate schools that have been converted into shelters for tens of thousands of displaced people, committing grave violations including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, and intimidation of civilians, Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor said in a statement issued Sunday.

Euro-Med Monitor documented the Israeli forces' raid on Al-Raf'i School in the Gaza Strip's Jabalia refugee camp, which houses thousands of displaced people, and the arrest of males as young as age 15. Israeli soldiers forced the males to strip down to their underwear and remain this way, then took them to an unknown location while forcefully displacing women amidst gunfire.

The rights organisation highlighted the Israeli forces' continued targeting of shelter centres, most of which were established in schools managed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and bear the United Nations logo. These centres have been targeted since the early days of Israel's genocidal war on the Gaza Strip, which began on 7 October.

The Israeli military attacks have taken multiple forms, Euro-Med Monitor noted. Initially, shelter centres were repeatedly targeted by aerial bombardment, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of civilians and the injury of hundreds more. This occurred on several occasions at Al-Fakhoura School and dozens of other schools in Gaza and its northern areas, as well as in Khan Yunis in the southern part of the Strip and Al-Bureij in the central area.

Preliminary information gathered by the Euro-Med Monitor team indicates that these attacks were unjustified and targeted innocent civilians who had sought refuge in shelter centres after receiving Israeli orders to evacuate their homes and residential areas.

Euro-Med Monitor reported that the second phase of targeting schools and shelters accompanied Israel's ground invasion of the Gaza Strip. It revealed that dozens of testimonies have been received regarding the Israeli army's storming of these schools after destroying their walls and gates with tanks, amidst intense gunfire and tank shells.

The human rights group also underscored that Israeli forces have carried out field executions at several of these schools, such as the "Shadia Abu Ghazala" school in Jabalia, where nine bodies were found, including those of women and children, after Israeli forces withdrew from the area on 13 December.

In a testimony about what happened, an elderly man called Youssef Khalil told Euro-Med Monitor that after Israeli forces stormed the school, two soldiers opened fire directly at his family members while they were in one of the classrooms.

Khalil pointed out that after his family members were killed, Israeli soldiers arrested him along with other Palestinian civilians and held them for several days, during which he was subjected to beatings and torture before his eventual release.

After the Israeli forces withdrew from the vicinity of the school where they were stationed for a week, Khalil returned to the building only to find the bodies of his family members in an advanced state of decomposition. Among the victims were a woman, her husband, and several of their children, Khalil said.

Video clips filmed at the school between 13 and 15 December and obtained by Euro-Med Monitor show classrooms that have been damaged, at least two bodies on the ground, and a number of other bodies, including a woman's body, as well as a mattress soaked in blood, bullet holes, and blood stains on the ground.

Alongside the killings in shelter schools, Euro-Med Monitor warned, Israeli forces are actively detaining males as young as 14 years, forcing them to strip and transferring them to other sites where inhumane torture and abuse take place. Women, meanwhile, are subjected to investigation and interrogation, with some being arrested and others being released.

Eyewitnesses informed the Euro-Med Monitor team that Israeli forces have looted the personal belongings and money of the displaced, confiscating golden jewelry from women, for example, in several instances.

Euro-Med Monitor mentioned that the third stage of violations against schools and shelter centers has been their transformation by Israel's military into barracks, to use as temporary headquarters for the Israeli occupying forces and as centres for investigating and tormenting Palestinian civilians.

It indicated that the fourth stage of targeting shelter centres involves their destruction, which Israel accomplishes either by planting explosives or completely demolishing them, as when it destroyed a school on 12 December near the Indonesian Hospital in Beit Lahia, northern Gaza.

Euro-Med Monitor emphasised that, as these schools are under the supervision of the United Nations and many of them were built with European funding from taxpayers in European Union countries, they are supposed to enjoy special protection during the peak of military attacks. In reality, however, Israeli forces continue to target the schools and celebrate their destruction; this is evident in many recent videos.

The Geneva-based human rights organisation pointed out that the deliberate targeting of shelter centres and the commission of killings, destruction, and torment are a natural result of the policy of impunity Israel enjoys—of the near-total international silence that encourages Israel to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The ongoing operations of killing, physical elimination, and systematic destruction of buildings and facilities have no explanation or justification other than being part of deliberate acts of revenge, stated Euro-Med Monitor, with civilians who are supposed to be protected under international humanitarian law paying the price.

Euro-Med Monitor called for an urgent international investigation into the horrific crimes committed by the Israeli army in its incursions into the Gaza Strip, including extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrests, and widespread torture of men and women, as well as the unnecessary destruction of schools.

It affirmed that, according to international humanitarian law, Israel is obliged to take all possible precautions to avoid harming civilians, and to ensure that they are provided with adequate conditions for their safety and shelter.

It also emphasised that civilians choosing to remain in evacuation areas do not lose their protection, and it is prohibited to target them under any pretext.

Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor stressed that an immediate ceasefire is the essential demand that everyone should work towards achieving in order to save the civilians who have so far survived the genocide targeting 2.3 million people in the Gaza Strip. It concluded that all international mechanisms to investigate the committed crimes should be activated, in order to achieve accountability, justice, and fairness.



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