

Israel must address excessive use of force and deaths in Gaza protests – UN rights chief

With over 40 Palestinians killed and more than 5,500 injured during protests in Gaza over the past month – many by live ammunition – the top United Nations human rights official on Friday called on Israel to ensure that its security forces do not resort to use of excessive force amid the ongoing demonstrations.

“Every week, we witness instances of use of lethal force against unarmed demonstrators,” said Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in a news release Friday.

“Warnings by the UN and others have seemingly gone unheeded, as the approach of the security forces from week to week does not seem to have changed.”

According to the High Commissioner’s Office, OHCHR, 35 of those killed were taking part in the ‘Great March of Return’ demonstrations. Most of them appear to have been unarmed or not presenting an imminent threat to the Israeli Security Forces (ISF) at the time of their killing or injury. 1,739 individuals were injured by live ammunition fire by ISF.

“The loss of life is deplorable, and the staggering number of injuries caused by live ammunition only confirms the sense that excessive force has been used against demonstrators – not once, not twice, but repeatedly,” added the High Commissioner.

Also concerning is that over the last four weeks of protest, four children were shot dead by Israeli forces, three of them by a bullet to the head or neck. A further 233 were injured by live ammunition, with some sustaining injuries that will result in lifelong disabilities, including through the amputation of limbs, stated the news release.

“The use of excessive force against any demonstrator is reprehensible, but children enjoy additional protection under international law,” Mr. Zeid said.

It is difficult to see how children, even those throwing stones, can present a threat of imminent death or serious injury to heavily protected security force personnel – *High Commissioner Zeid*

“It is difficult to see how children, even those throwing stones, can present a threat of imminent death or serious injury to heavily protected security force personnel [...] Images of a child being shot as he runs away from Israeli security forces are downright shocking.”

According to OHCHR, a 14-year-old boy, Mohammad Ayyoub, was killed by a bullet to the head on 20 April.

“It is difficult to see how tire-burning or stone-throwing, or even Molotov-cocktails thrown from a significant distance at heavily protected security forces in defensive positions can be seen to constitute such threat,” read the news release.

High Commissioner Zeid also underscored the obligation of every country to ensure that all loss of life and serious injury is investigated and those responsible held to account. Any investigations into the events in Gaza “must fulfil this purpose,” he stressed.

He also voiced concern that continued lack of accountability could lead to future human rights violations in relation to the protests.

“By the end of today – and next Friday, and the Friday after that – more unarmed Palestinians who were alive this morning will have been killed, simply because, while exercising their right to protest, they approached a fence, or otherwise attracted the attention of the soldiers on the other side,” Mr Zeid said.

“Israel’s failure to consistently prosecute violations committed by members of its security forces, encourages them to use deadly force against their fellow unarmed human beings, even when they present no threat.”