
FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Near East: Switzerland calls on Israel to uphold international humanitarian law

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The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) is deeply concerned about the recent escalation in violence in the Near East and its humanitarian consequences. As the occupying power, it demands that Israel respect international humanitarian law in its military efforts to liberate a captured soldier. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), which is part of the DFA, has earmarked an additional one million Swiss francs for essential medical supplies for the civilian population in the Gaza Strip

The recent escalation in violence has reached a new peak with the destruction of the offices of the Palestinian prime minister. The DFA is deeply concerned about this development and has renewed its appeal to Israel, as the occupying power, to respect international humanitarian law in the measures it undertakes to liberate the captured soldier. It appeals to the soldier's captors to treat him humanly.

A number of actions by the Israeli Defence Forces in their offensive against the Gaza Strip have violated the principle of proportionality and are to be seen as forms of collective punishment, which is forbidden. For the DFA, there is no doubt that Israel has not taken the precautions required of it in international law to protect the civilian population and infrastructure. The destruction of a power station, the attack on the offices of the Palestinian Prime Minister, the arbitrary arrests of a large number of democratically elected representatives of the people and ministers, as well as the withdrawal of the residence permits of three members of parliament and a minister in East Jerusalem cannot be justified. Attacks on civilian property are forbidden by international law. The DFA demands that Israel forgo any further attacks on civilian property, ensure the protection of the civilian population, and release the detained representatives insofar as no concrete grounds in individual cases exist that fully justify their lawful arrest.

Humanitarian consequences

The power station that was destroyed by the Israeli forces on 28 June, provided 43 per cent of the electricity supply to the Gaza Strip. 700,000 people have been affected by power cuts. Water supplies have also been badly hit since not all pumps can continue to function, and in addition there is a lack of petrol and other fuels. It will take quite some time to repair the power station and only then if the necessary parts can be delivered to the Gaza Strip. The situation is also worrying in the hospitals and health centres, which are lacking water and where there is no longer enough fuel for their generators. The transportation of goods and persons is hardly possible, causing a general lack of fresh produce, meat and dairy products, which are left rotting in warehouses. The opening of the checkpoint at Kami, which is important for goods handling, is essential for resuming food supplies.

Already in June 2006, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation approved one million francs for the purchase of medicines. A second million has now been earmarked for supplying the civilian population with essential goods. An expert has been deployed to the crisis zone to ensure the smooth running of the humanitarian operations.

Last week, the DFA received representatives of both sides to demand compliance with the rules of international humanitarian law. It also called for the rapid release of the captured Israeli soldier as an important step towards calming the current situation.