
Voice of the victims

Giving a voice to the victims, the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict has completed two rounds of public hearings that are part of its ongoing investigations. The Mission is due to report to the Human Rights Council in September.

"The aim of holding these public hearings – and this is the first time in such a UN fact finding mission that public hearings have been held – was to show the human side of the suffering; to give a voice to the victims so that they are not lost among statistics," Head of the Mission Justice Richard Goldstone told a press conference on 7 July in Geneva.

Last week in Gaza, during two days of public hearings members of the Mission listened to what Goldstone described as "stories of intense pain, loss and suffering from the people of Gaza." At the 6 to 7 July public hearings in Geneva, victims and witnesses from Israel and the West Bank "have also shared with us moving stories," he said.

The Fact Finding Mission has been mandated by the Human Rights Council to conduct an independent investigation into all violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law in the context of the 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009 military operations, whether they took place before, during or after those dates.

"No written words can by themselves convey human stories the way people can do it in their own voice and words." Goldstone thanked all the courageous women and men who had come forward to share their stories.

The Mission heard close to 40 testimonies, many from victims who had lost members of their families and their livelihoods, and called for the protections required by the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders to be accorded to all those participating in the hearings.

He pointed out that the Mission would have preferred to hold the second round of hearings in Israel and the West Bank, but was unable to do so because the Government of Israel is so far not cooperating with the Mission.

"Nevertheless, as you have heard, we have made every effort to ensure that victims from all sides have had a chance to speak," said Goldstone, who categorically rejected media reports that claimed members of Hamas were accompanying the Mission when it interviewed witnesses in Gaza.

It was "absolutely devoid of any truth at all," he said.

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