



Mr. Philippe Lazzarini
Commissioner-General of UNRWA

17 May 2021

Re: Urgent Action Needed to Coordinate and Protect Safe and Neutralized Zones and Provide Humanitarian Assistance to Palestinian Civilians Displaced as a Result of Israel's Military Offensive on the Gaza Strip

Dear Mr. Philippe Lazzarini,

I address this urgent letter to you in relation to the systematic and indiscriminate attacks on the Palestinian civilian population since the start of the Israeli Occupying Forces (IOF)' bombardment on the Gaza Strip, and the resulting displacement of some 35,000 civilians in urgent need of safe shelter.

As the IOF' strikes intensify, the toll of human casualties continues to worsen. As of Monday, 17 May 2021 at 12:30 am, 198 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed, including 58 children and a further 1,300 wounded, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza. Since 10 May 2021, Al-Haq has documented the indiscriminate targeting of residential neighbourhoods and ongoing bombardment on civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip.

Al-Haq acknowledges and commends the opening of urgent shelters for Palestinian civilians escaping the Israeli bombardment, at buildings of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). According to UNRWA, 35,000 Palestinian displaced persons have found shelter in 45 UNRWA sites throughout the Gaza Strip.

Given the small geographical scape of the Gaza Strip only 51 kilometres long, and the density of its two million civilian population, including one million children, the containment of the population in the territory under military closure and naval blockade and the current extensive bombing campaign, it is imperative that safe zones and neutralized zones are established in areas where conflict is taking place, as per Articles 14 and 15 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and customary law. Considering the persistence and intensification of the IOF' systematic and indiscriminate targeting of civilians and civilian structures, Al-Haq expresses its deepest concerns and fears that the high human toll and mass displacement will continue to increase. Al-Haq urges the ICRC, UNRWA and all UN agencies to urgently and immediately coordinate with Israel to ensure that areas are designated as safe zones and neutralized zones for civilian protection in the Gaza Strip.

Furthermore, Al-Haq is deeply worried by reports coming from the Gaza Strip that Al-Buraq and Al-Aqsa elementary schools, located in the vicinity of the Palestine Mosque, sheltering forcibly displaced civilians, have been warned by the IOF to be urgently evacuated prior to a forthcoming



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attack. Such bombings will induce an intolerable wave of secondary displacement amongst Palestinian civilians. Noting that UNRWA premises, property and assets are inviolable under the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, Al-Haq recalls UNRWA's mandate to provide assistance and protection to Palestinian refugees. Al-Haq reminds that, under Article 11 of the draft agreement relating to hospital and safety zones and localities annexed to the Fourth Geneva Convention, "in no circumstances may hospital and safety zones be the object of attack." It is to be feared that the targeting of Al-Buraq and Al-Aqsa schools will further aggravate a disastrous humanitarian situation provoked by the severe damage caused to the main artery leading to [Al-Shifaa hospital](#) on 16 May 2021.

Notwithstanding the provision of a safe zone, Al-Haq also expresses its grave concern about reports that Palestinian displaced persons are still being denied access to water, food and other essential services such as blankets and mattresses in this time of humanitarian emergency. Al-Haq recalls that the purpose of establishing "safety zones and localities" under Article 14 of the Fourth Geneva Convention is to provide protection to civilian populations from direct and indirect "effects of war," which includes "shortage of food, clothing and medical supplies, breakdown of health services, etc.."¹ Al-Haq recalls that Israel, the Occupying Power, is obligated under Article 59 of the Fourth Geneva Convention to "permit the free passage" of "consignments of foodstuffs, medical supplies and clothing."

Al-Haq calls on the ICRC as a matter of urgency to immediately intervene and lend their good offices to facilitate the institution and recognition of "hospital and safety zones and localities," as per Article 14 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, in UNRWA premises, commensurate to the extent of humanitarian displacement. Al-Haq calls on the ICRC, UNRWA and UN agencies to urgently and immediately coordinate to ensure that areas designated as safe zones and neutralised zones for civilian protection in the Gaza Strip provide satisfactory essential services to protected civilians.

Yours sincerely,

Shawan Jabarin
General Director, Al-Haq



¹ 1948 Commentary to Article 14 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

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تتمتع الحق بصفة استشارية لدى المجلس الاقتصادي والاجتماعي في الأمم المتحدة
NGO in Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations



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Annex



Annex I: Image of UNRWA Boys' Primary School, C and D, designated as a safe haven in Al-Nasr Street, Gaza City. 17 May 2021, on file with Al-Haq.