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Israeli Army's conduct in Gaza offensive questioned

Prime minister vows to defend soldiers

By Joel Greenberg | Tribune correspondent
10:09 PM CST, January 25, 2009

JERUSALEM — Muhammad Shurrab thought he was safe.

Driving home with his sons during a four-hour lull in Israel's offensive against Hamas in the [Gaza](#) Strip, he said, he ran into a hail of gunfire from an Israeli army position.

One son was killed. The other bled to death in his father's arms nearly 12 hours later after repeated attempts to send an ambulance failed when the army did not approve access, Shurrab said. A hospital was only minutes away.

"We work so hard to get bread for our children, we sacrifice so much to bring up solid sons, and now, because of a crazy soldier everything is gone in a minute," Shurrab said, recounting the events in a telephone interview. "What is the use of such sacrifice?"

The Israeli Army said it allowed an ambulance into the area once operational conditions permitted. But the shooting account is one of a series of incidents in Israel's 22-day war against Hamas that have raised questions about the army's conduct during the campaign.

On Sunday, Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#) promised state protection for army officers and soldiers against possible attempts to prosecute them abroad for alleged war crimes during the campaign, in which more than 1,300 people were killed, more than half of them civilians, according to health officials.

"The commanders and soldiers who were sent on missions in Gaza should know that they are safe from various tribunals, and that the state of Israel will assist them in this matter and defend them as they

defended us with their bodies during the military operation in Gaza," Olmert told a Cabinet meeting.

The military censor has barred the media from naming or publishing photos of battalion commanders or lower-ranking officers who served in Gaza, for fear they could be identified and arrested while traveling abroad.

The Israeli offensive to halt Hamas rocket attacks pitted the military against gunmen fighting among civilians, often in civilian clothes themselves, using the houses, roads and alleys of densely populated Gaza as a battleground.

Seeking to protect its soldiers as it moved into crowded neighborhoods, the army used overwhelming firepower to suppress any resistance, causing widespread destruction and loss of life.

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The debate over the army's conduct centers on the question of whether it did everything feasible to avoid civilian deaths, as required by international law, or made reckless use of force at the cost of extensive civilian casualties.

Military spokesmen have asserted that the army dropped leaflets and placed phone calls to tens of thousands of people warning them of its advance and urging them to leave their homes in an effort to separate the civilians from the militants. While many people did flee, others did not, fearing that they would come under fire in other locations, as was the case in three UN schools sheltering refugees that were hit by Israeli shells.

Col. Herzl Halevy, the commander of the army's paratroopers brigade, told Israel Radio in an interview on Friday that while his troops "did not move in with a low level of power," soldiers "made a great effort not to cause unnecessary harm."

"We searched thousands of rooms and didn't shoot a single civilian in a room," he said.

But some of the army's tactics, such as the use of shells packed with white phosphorous, which doctors in Gaza say caused deep burns among victims they have treated, set off an outcry by human-rights groups, who called the use of the weapon in densely populated areas a violation of the laws of war. The army says it is investigating, but notes that use of phosphorous for smoke screens is legal.

There are also reports of unprovoked shootings of civilians, like Shurrab's account.

A 64-year-old farmer, Shurrab said the incident happened on Jan. 16, as he drove back with two sons from his farm near the town of Khan Yunis during a four-hour suspension of Israeli attacks to allow people to stock up on supplies.

As Shurrab approached the town and was waved through by a soldier on a tank, he recalled, his Land Rover came under intense gunfire from an Israeli position in a building about 40 yards away. The area was deserted after residents had fled.

Shurrab said that he and his sons dived for cover, and after a soldier shouted at them to get out, his eldest son, Kassab, 28, was fatally shot several times as he stepped out of the vehicle. A younger son, Ibrahim, 18, was shot in the leg, and Shurrab himself was wounded in the arm.

The wounded father and son lay on the ground for hours, in full view of the military position, making futile attempts to call for an ambulance, Shurrab recalled.

An attempt by Ibrahim to phone for help was met with a warning shot and an order to toss his cell phone away, his father said. Shurrab managed to call an emergency number, but was told that attempts by the Red Cross to coordinate the dispatch of an ambulance with the army had failed.

The hours passed, and night fell. Ibrahim, who was losing blood, grew weak and cold, and his father helped him back into the vehicle, covering him with his jacket to keep him warm. Shurrab said he spoke by phone to the Arabic satellite channel Al Jazeera and the BBC Arabic service, to no avail.

"Ibrahim's breathing started to change, and I shouted to the soldiers: 'My son is dying. Give us some first aid,'" but there was no response, he said.

In Tel Aviv, Tom Mehager of Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, who was contacted about the case by a doctor in Gaza, called the army's humanitarian coordination center, but was told that securing passage for an ambulance at night "was a problem," he recalled.

After midnight, next to his father, Ibrahim stopped breathing. About 11 a.m., an ambulance arrived to collect Shurrab and the bodies of his two sons, Shurrab said. They were taken to a hospital about half a mile away.

Asked about the incident, an army spokesman said that the military "is unable to reconstruct and investigate every single event that occurred during the intense fighting, and cannot confirm or deny every claim." He added that an ambulance was allowed into the area "after operational conditions permitted it."

Ofer Shelah, an Israeli columnist who served as an army reserve officer in Lebanon in the early 1980s, where troops also faced guerrillas among civilians, recalled that shootings at civilian vehicles were not uncommon there.

"Soldiers are fearful and don't want to take chances," Shelah said. "It's a battlefield where the enemy looks like a civilian, and you're constantly hearing that someone could open fire at you from the back of a car, so you don't wait until someone shoots first."

"When the guidelines are that troop safety takes priority, these things are bound to happen," Shelah added. "It takes very strict rules of engagement to make sure they



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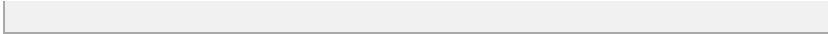
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