



General Assembly

Distr.: General
12 June 2024

English only

Human Rights Council

Fifty-sixth session

18 June–12 July 2024

Agenda item 2

**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 May 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Evidence of Mass Graves Containing Hundreds of Bodies Throughout Israel’s Genocidal Attacks Against Palestinians in Gaza

The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd wishes to highlight an extremely worrying and dark trend emerging from the Israeli 2023/24 genocidal war on Gaza. This trend appears to be that primarily in the vicinity of Palestinian hospitals that were raided by the Israeli army, mass graves containing the buried bodies of missing Palestinians have been found, some showing evidence of torture and of being reportedly buried alive. This written statement will show that while further independent investigations are necessary for a full picture of the situation to emerge, there is already enough evidence to point to apparent grave human rights violations, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

In April 2024, The United Nations human rights chief, Volker Türk, sounded the alarm in a statement which stated that he was ‘horrified’ of mass graves containing hundreds of bodies at two of Gaza’s largest hospitals. Palestinian civil defence teams had begun exhuming bodies from a mass grave outside the Nasser hospital complex in Khan Younis after Israeli troops withdrew. A total of 310 bodies have been found after the Israeli siege of the hospital. Ravina Shamdasani, spokesperson for the UN high commissioner for human rights, said in a statement “We feel the need to raise the alarm because clearly there have been multiple bodies discovered”. According to Shamdasani, bodies were discovered “buried deep in the ground and covered with waste”, adding that “among the deceased were allegedly older people, women and wounded”, including some bound and stripped of their clothes. “Some of them had their hands tied, which of course indicates serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, and these need to be subjected to further investigations,” the UN spokesperson added.(1)

Gazan rescue teams and several missions from the United Nations also reported the discovery of multiple mass grave sites in the Shifa hospital compound, in Gaza City, earlier in April 2024, after Israeli ground troops withdrew after a prolonged siege. Along with the bodies found near Nasser hospital complex, the ones discovered in the vicinity of al Shifa hospital were reportedly said to bring the toll almost 400 bodies. Palestinian Civil Defence officials states that mass graves found in two hospitals in the Gaza Strip containing bodies, including those of women, children and the elderly, revealed horrifying new details. The bodies showed signs of torture and executions.

A testimony provided by Palestinian Civil Defence official member Mohammed Mughier explained that approximately ten of the bodies were found with tied hands while others still had medical tubes attached to them, indicating they may have been buried alive. He asked: “We need forensic examination for approximately 20 bodies for people who we think were buried alive.” Meanwhile, for Yamen Abu Sulaiman, the head of the civil defence department in southern Khan Younis where Nasser Hospital is located, three separate mass graves were found at the facility – one behind the morgue, one in front of the morgue, and one near the dialysis building. The testimony provided by Abu Sulaiman noted that solely 65 bodies have been identified by relatives of 392 recovered due to decomposition, mutilation and torture, or other difficulties. In a shocking revelation, Sulaiman added that the bodies found in the mass graves were “stacked together” and pointing to evidence of field executions by the Israeli soldiers. The Palestinian Civil Defence has called for international and independent investigations into the apparent war crimes and crimes against humanity.(2)

For Amnesty International, discovery of mass graves highlights urgent need to grant access to independent human rights investigators. Responding to the discovery of mass graves containing hundreds of bodies at two of Gaza’s hospitals, Amnesty International stated: “The harrowing discovery of these mass graves underscores the urgency of ensuring immediate access for human rights investigators, including forensic experts, to the occupied Gaza Strip to ensure that evidence is preserved and to carry out independent and transparent investigations with the aim of guaranteeing accountability for any violations of international law.”

The Amnesty International official further continued: “Lack of access for human rights investigators to Gaza has hampered effective investigations into the full scale of the human rights violations and crimes under international law committed over the past six months, allowing for the documentation of just a tiny fraction of these abuses.”(3)

In addition to the bodies found in the vicinity of hospitals, in January 2024, a mass grave has been discovered on the grounds of a school in Beit Lahiya, in the northern Gaza Strip. The CNN reported that the Palestinian Prisoners Society testified of ‘the discovery of the bodies of 30 martyrs inside one of the schools that was besieged by the occupation,’ and alleged that those killed had been “handcuffed and blindfolded.” The Palestinian Foreign Ministry in the occupied West Bank alleged that “according to testimonies from Palestinian citizens, more than 30 decomposing bodies...have been discovered buried in the north of the Gaza Strip. They were killed, seemingly executed, while blindfolded and their hand shackled.”(4)

On May 10, 2024, the United Nations Security Council provided an important statement on the pattern of mass graves in Gaza. The statement said: “The members of the Security Council expressed their deep concern over reports of the discovery of mass graves, in and around the Nasser and Al Shifa medical facilities in Gaza, where several hundred bodies, including women, children and older persons, were buried. The members of the Security Council underlined the need for accountability for violations of international law and called for investigators to be allowed the unimpeded access to all locations of mass graves in Gaza to conduct immediate, independent, thorough, comprehensive, transparent and impartial investigations to establish the circumstances behind the graves. The members of the Security Council reaffirmed the importance of allowing families to know the fate and whereabouts of their missing relatives, consistent with international humanitarian law.”(5)

On May 11 2024, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, the bodies of 80 Palestinians were uncovered in three mass graves at al-Shifa Hospital, bringing the total number of bodies discovered in such graves in different sites throughout Gaza following the withdrawal of Israeli forces to 520. For the Health Ministry in Gaza there is “hard evidence” that some of the victims were “executed” at point-blank range, with bullet wounds found in their heads and chests.(6) Also in May 2024, Palestinian officials said they had discovered a new mass grave at al-Shifa Hospital, which was sieged by Israeli forces in March, marking the seventh such grave found throughout Gaza since the start of Israel’s war.(7)

To conclude, in this written statement the Palestinian Return Centre Ltd calls on the UN Human Rights Council to urgently investigate the allegations of mass graves found in Gaza indicating a pattern of grave human rights violations followed by willing attempts to cover over and erase evidence of crimes committed by the Israeli army. It also calls of Member States to take all available measures, including by imposing arms embargos and sanctions, to increase pressure on the state of Israel to end its genocidal war of Palestinians in Gaza.

(1) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/23/un-rights-chief-horrified-by-reports-of-mass-graves-at-two-gaza-hospitals>

(3) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/04/gaza-discovery-of-mass-graves-highlights-urgent-need-to-grant-access-to-independent-human-rights-investigators/>

(5) <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15692.doc.htm> s

(6) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/5/11/israels-war-on-gaza-live-battles-rage-in-rafah-as-tanks-troops-advance?update=2893123>

(7) <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2024/5/9/gazas-seventh-mass-grave-discovered-at-al-shifa-hospital>