

Gaza: 'I watched an Israeli soldier shoot dead my two little girls'

Grieving Palestinian father says children were killed after family obeyed order from troops to leave Gaza home

By Donald Macintyre in Jabalya

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A Palestinian father has claimed that he saw two of his young daughters shot dead and another critically injured by an Israeli soldier who emerged from a stationary tank and opened fire as the family obeyed an order from the Israeli forces to leave their home.

Khaled Abed Rabbo said Amal, aged two and Suad, seven, were killed by fire from the soldier's semi-automatic rifle. His third daughter, Samer, four, has been evacuated to intensive care in a Belgian hospital after suffering critical spinal injuries which he said were inflicted in the attack early in Israel's ground offensive.

Mr Abed Rabbo stood near the wreckage of his subsequently destroyed home on the eastern edge of the northern Gaza town of Jabalya yesterday and described how a tank had parked outside the building at 12.50pm on 7 January and ordered the family in Arabic through a megaphone to leave building. He said his 60-year-old mother had also been shot at as she left waving her white headscarf with her son, daughter in law and her three grandchildren.



AP

Khaled Abed Rabbo in the remains of his family house, destroyed during the three-week Israeli offensive

"Two soldiers were on the tank eating chips, then one man came out of the tank with a rifle and started shooting the kids," Mr Abed Rabbo, who receives a salary as a policeman from the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority in Ramallah said. The family say they think the weapon used by the soldier was an M16 and that the first to be shot was Amal. Mr Abed Rabbo said that Suad was then shot with what he claimed were 12 bullets, and then Samer.

The soldier who fired the rifle had what Mr Abed Rabbo thought were ringlets visible below his helmet, he said. The small minority of ultra-Orthodox Jews who serve in the army are in a unit which did not take part in the Gaza offensive and only a very small number of settlers who also favour that hairstyle serve in other units.

It has so far been impossible independently to verify Mr Abed Rabbo's claim and the military said last night Israeli Defence Forces "does not target civilians, only Hamas terrorists and infrastructure". It added: "The IDF is investigating various claims made with regard to Operation Cast Lead and at the end of its investigation will respond accordingly."

The district is named Abed Rabbo after the clan who live in most of it. The dense concrete roof of the house now hangs at more at more than a 45-degree angle, and at least three other substantial buildings have been flattened in the agricultural, semi-rural immediate neighbourhood. Khaled Abed Rabbo said that there had been a delay before the ambulance could reach the building because the road from the west had been made impassable by the churning of the tanks.

The soldiers had in the end let the family leave on foot, he said. He added that they walked two kilometres before

finding a vehicle to take them to Kamal Adwan Hospital. He said: "I carried Suad, who was dead, my wife carried Amal and my brother Ibrahim carried Samer."

He added: "We are not Hamas. My children were not Hamas. And if they were going to shoot anyone it should have been me." He added: "I want the international community and the International Red Cross to ask Israel why it has done this to us. They talk about democracy but is it democracy to kill children? What did the kids do to them? What did my house do to them? They destroyed my life?"

Gaza City is showing signs of returning to a form of normality as more shops reopen. The offices of the main Palestinian telephone company Jawwal reopened though this has not eased severe problems of connectivity on the Palestinian mobile network.

Some Hamas policemen were back directing traffic, though in smaller numbers than before the offensive. Unconfirmed figures are that 270 Hamas policemen were killed, mainly in the air attacks during the first week. In a victory rally in Gaza city yesterday, Hamas supporters converged on a square near the remains of the bombed parliament building..

'Heartbreaking': The ugly face of war

The UN secretary general, looking distressed, described the devastation of Gaza as "heartbreaking" on a visit to the area yesterday after the 22-day Israeli assault.

"I have seen only a fraction of the destruction," said Ban Ki-moon, as he stood in front of a UN warehouse set on fire by Israeli shells last Thursday. "This is shocking and alarming. These are heartbreaking scenes I have seen and I am deeply grieved by what I have seen today." he said.

Mr Ban demanded a full investigation into the Israeli shelling of the UN Relief and Works Agency compound. UN officials say the compound, still smouldering yesterday, was targeted by white phosphorus munitions which are not supposed to be used in densely populated areas because of the harm to civilians. Mr Ban said the Israeli attacks on UNRWA headquarters and two UN schools in Gaza, one of which killed 40 sheltering Palestinians, were "outrageous".

Amnesty International said Israel's repeated use of the munitions despite evidence of their indiscriminate effects and harm to civilians "is a war crime". The Israeli army has launched an investigation but says Hamas fighters operate from densely populated areas, and used UN buildings as cover for attacks.

Mr Ban said: "It has been especially troubling and heartbreaking for me as secretary general that I couldn't end this faster," he said. He urged Israel and Hamas to "exercise maximum restraint and nurture the ceasefire".

Anne Penketh

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