

HRC 59

**Statement by Navi Pillay, Chair of the
Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory,
including East Jerusalem, and Israel
17 June 2025, Geneva**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr. President. Excellencies. Good afternoon,

I speak before this Council, 20 months into the most ruthless, prolonged and widespread attack against the Palestinian people since 1948. The goal of the Israeli government is abundantly clear: the destruction of life in Gaza.

For a year and a half now, our Commission has been investigating the violence in Gaza. We have seen constant escalation and more and more deaths and injuries. The violence has extended into southern Lebanon, then Yemen and now Iran. We have said in relation to violence in Palestine and Israel that security can only come with peace. We say that again now in relation to this new regional conflict involving Iran and Israel. Peace, justice, and respect for human rights are the only ways forward in which the peoples of the region can live in security.

We should not let this regional escalation divert our attention from the ongoing carnage in Gaza where hundreds continue to be killed each week. In the last three months the entire population of Gaza was forcibly transferred into small enclaves and Palestinians were killed while attempting to receive aid, bringing life to its bleakest point to date.

Children have paid an unimaginable price. More than 1,300 children have been killed just from the end of the ceasefire on 18 March to date, and more than 15,000 children have been identified as killed since October 2023. These are not just intolerable numbers; each child killed represents a past, present and future that will no longer exist.

Excellencies

The report before you today examines attacks on educational, religious and cultural sites in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and in Israel.

Our findings show that, as Israeli security forces killed thousands of children, they also obliterated the education system in Gaza. More than 90 percent of schools and university buildings in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed, creating conditions where education for children has been made impossible. With the loss of education, Palestinians are also losing their source of stability, hope and a possibility of a future.

Israeli airstrikes have targeted educational facilities, believed to be safe refuge areas, killing the displaced, including children and women, and deliberately shelled, burned and demolished schools and universities. The Commission could not identify any military necessity which justifies such actions and concludes that these actions show an intent to destroy these facilities in order to curtail Palestinians' access to education in the long-term.

These attacks were part of a widespread and relentless assault against the Palestinian people in which Israeli forces have committed war crimes, including directing attacks against civilians and wilful killing, and the crime against humanity of extermination.

Excellencies,

The systematic targeting of educational facilities has extended well beyond Gaza and has impacted all Palestinian children in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. In the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, closures, demolition orders, restrictions, military raids and large-scale military operations have resulted in a significant loss of school days.

Settlers have been responsible for violent attacks against schools and students, leaving children and educators terrified and traumatised. Israeli authorities often directly incite such attacks or do not protect Palestinians, promoting a regime of impunity for violent settlers.

Excellencies,

Attacks by Israeli security forces have damaged more than half of all religious and cultural sites in the Gaza Strip, part of a wider campaign to destroy civilian targets and civilian infrastructure through airstrikes and shelling. Israeli attacks also

targeted religious sites that served as places of refuge, killing hundreds of people, including women and children.

Such damage was completely avoidable, given that Israeli security forces knew or should have known the locations and significance of Gaza's prominent cultural sites and should have planned all military operations accordingly.

The damage to religious and historical buildings, monuments and other tangible heritage has a cascading effect and deeply affects intangible cultural elements, such as religious and cultural practices, memories and history, undermining the identity of Palestinians as a people.

In the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the Commission found that Israeli authorities have appropriated, developed and profited from cultural heritage sites representing Palestinian, Jewish and other cultures and have suppressed non-Jewish heritage. They displaced Palestinian residents from those sites, blocked or severely restricted Palestinians from accessing such sites, and conducted archaeological excavations leading to the creation of tourist attractions, which is unlawful under international law.

Such actions deny the relationship of Palestinians to the land's heritage and history. Israel has been using cultural heritage and settlements as leverage for its unlawful territorial claims in the occupied West Bank, in flagrant defiance of multiple United Nations resolutions and the 2024 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

Excellencies,

We have repeatedly requested the Israeli authorities to grant us immediate unimpeded access to the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including Gaza, in accordance with our mandate and the order of the International Court of Justice of 24 May 2024. Israel has ignored these requests.

The Commission reiterates its call for a complete and unconditional cessation of hostilities. We demand an immediate and full end to the siege imposed on Gaza and the release of all those arbitrarily detained, including all hostages both Israeli and Palestinian. Attacks against educational, religious and cultural sites must stop immediately. All parties must ensure the

protection, preservation and development of cultural heritage sites representing Jewish and Palestinian cultures alike.

Excellencies,

We have emphasized, on several occasions, that atrocities committed by one side do not justify those committed by the other in reaction. All those who have committed atrocities must be brought to justice and held fully accountable. We have also noted that the October 7 attacks against Israel and Israel's subsequent attacks on Gaza were preceded by decades of violence and retribution, dispossession, unlawful occupation and denial of the Palestinians' right to self-determination.

The extensive physical destruction of Gaza, the dismantling of its educational and healthcare systems, the destruction of housing and infrastructure, and the targeting and destruction of heritage sites, including limiting of access to those sites and the erasure of their heterogenic history, are intended to erode Palestinians' historical ties to the land and weaken their collective identity, thereby hindering their right to self-determination.

In line with the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, the Commission emphasises that all Member States, individually and collectively, and the United Nations are under a legal obligation to work cooperatively to bring to an end the unlawful occupation and ensure the Palestinian's right to self-determination.

The Commission strongly supports the resolution adopted by the General Assembly last week condemning the use of starvation as a weapon of war, demanding a full lifting of the Israeli blockade on humanitarian aid, and insisting on the protection of civilians under international law.

It is incumbent on all States to act resolutely to end the slaughter and stop the atrocities.

I thank you.