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زبانهای اروپایی

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27.09.2024



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## Exploding Pagers Add to Israel's War Crimes

As it continues its genocidal campaign in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, Israel is demonstrating its capacity to commit war crimes in Lebanon as well, writes Marjorie Cohn.



Stand With Lebanon vigil and rally outside the Lebanese embassy in Washington on Tuesday night. (Diane Krauthamer, Flickr, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Israeli bombing of a residential neighborhood in Beirut is also a war crime.

Israel escalated attacks against Lebanon on Sept. 23, marking the deadliest day of Israeli bombings in that country since 2006. Israel's strikes in southern and eastern Lebanon, as well

as the capital city of Beirut, left a death toll of at least 274, including women, children and paramedics. [The toll on Tuesday was reportedly more than 550 people.]

The Israeli military targeted “medical centres, ambulances and cars of people trying to flee,” according to Al Jazeera, which cited Lebanon’s Health Minister Firass Abiad as the source for the information. Israel also targeted civilian homes, which it claimed were housing Hezbollah weapons.

This latest targeting of Lebanese civilians comes on the heels of Israel’s detonation of hand-held electronic devices in civilian areas of Lebanon on Sept. 17 and 18, when Israeli forces remotely triggered multiple explosions of electronic pagers and walkie-talkies that killed at least 37 people, including a 9-year-old girl and an 11-year-old boy, and maimed or injured 3,250 people, 200 critically.

About 500 people suffered severe eye wounds and others received grave injuries to their hands, faces and bodies. The blasts occurred in residential buildings, barber shops, grocery stores, cars and at funerals. Many civilians, including government and hospital workers, were killed.

Elias Warrak, an ophthalmologist at Mount Lebanon University Hospital in Beirut, treated several of those injured by the blasts. He told the BBC that between 60 percent and 70 percent of the patients he attended had to have at least one eye removed.

“Some of the patients, we had to remove both eyes. It kills me. In my past 25 years in practice, I’ve never removed as many eyes as I did yesterday [Sept.17].”

Israel’s weaponization of 3,000 to 4,000 pagers and walkie-talkies programmed to explode simultaneously constituted “terrifying” violations of international law, according to 22 independent United Nations experts, including 13 special rapporteurs.

The radios and pagers were reportedly distributed to people associated with Hezbollah, which includes both military and civilian individuals. “At the time of the attacks there was no way of knowing who possessed each device and who was nearby,” the experts noted.

“Simultaneous attacks by thousands of devices would inevitably violate humanitarian law, by failing to verify each target, and distinguish between protected civilians and those who could potentially be attacked for taking a direct part in hostilities.”

A booby-trap is defined as something designed to kill or injure unexpectedly when a person performs an apparently safe act like answering a pager. International humanitarian law prohibits the use of booby-traps that are disguised as harmless objects when they are constructed and designed with explosives. They breach the principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions.

## Range of War Crimes

“These attacks violate the human right to life, absent any indication that the victims posed an imminent lethal threat to anyone else at the time,” the U.N. experts wrote. “Such attacks could constitute war crimes of murder, attacking civilians, and launching indiscriminate attacks.”

The U.N. experts declared, “It is also a war crime to commit violence intended to spread terror among civilians, including to intimidate or deter them from supporting an adversary,” adding, “A climate of fear now pervades everyday life in Lebanon.”

Amal Saad, an expert on Hezbollah, told *Drop Site News*,

“Everyone’s scared to send text messages, to make calls, and they’re afraid to open laptops. It’s definitely led to some level of complete disorientation, fear, confusion, paranoia. It has huge psychological effects.”

Saad noted that the purpose behind the explosions “was to terrorize and paralyze and demoralize.”

Volker Türk, U.N. high commissioner for human rights, likewise denounced the attacks in a statement, calling them “shocking, and their impact on civilians unacceptable,” and saying that “the fear and terror unleashed” was “profound.”

Türk wrote,

“Simultaneous targeting of thousands of individuals, whether civilians or members of armed groups, without knowledge as to who was in possession of the targeted devices, their location and their surroundings at the time of the attack, violates international human rights law and, to the extent applicable, international humanitarian law.”



Türk addressing the General Assembly in December 2023. (UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe)

The independent U.N. experts urged states to bring to justice those who ordered and executed the attacks, under the well-established doctrine of universal jurisdiction.

But the weaponized electronic devices weren't the only recent war crimes Israel has committed against Lebanon.

### **Bombing Residential Neighborhood in Beirut**

On Sept. 20, an Israeli airstrike on an apartment building in a residential Beirut suburb killed a top Hezbollah leader along with at least 37 Lebanese people, including three children and seven women, and injured at least 68. This constituted a war crime as it was an intentional attack with knowledge it would cause incidental loss of life or injury to civilians and was clearly excessive in relation to the military advantage Israel sought.

U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan celebrated the attack, calling it “justice.”

Mohamad Elmasry, professor in the media studies program at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, described Sullivan's statement as “shocking.” Elmasry told Al Jazeera, “The United States has a long history of its war crimes and it has been covering for Israeli crimes not only during the past 11.5 months [in Gaza] but for decades now — giving Israel cover at the UN and in other diplomatic circles and supplying Israel with weapons to target civilians.”

Indeed, the U.S. routinely vetoes U.N. Security Council resolutions condemning Israel for its war crimes in the occupied Palestinian territory and has pressured countries in the U.N. General Assembly to facilitate Israeli impunity.

But on Sept. 18, the General Assembly overwhelmingly adopted the State of Palestine's resolution demanding an end to the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory in accordance with international law, as recently affirmed by the International Court of Justice.

The historic resolution calls for sanctioning Israel, that is, forbidding member states from doing business with Israel or promoting the legitimacy of Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian territory. The vote was 124 in favor and 14 against with 43 states abstaining and 12 states not voting. Only the U.S., Israel, and several island states voted “no.”

The resolution reflects the opposition of the international community to Israel's lawless behavior. It remains to be seen if and how the 124 states that voted for the resolution will implement it.

Since Sept. 18, Israel has continued to commit war crimes in Lebanon. It has launched additional attacks on civilians, including the Sept. 20 bombings of an apartment building in Beirut, and the current targeting of civilian apartments, ambulances and medical centers, killing and wounding mounting numbers of civilians.

Israeli officials claimed that Hezbollah was storing thousands of long-range rockets in civilian homes. They sent people in Lebanon text messages and automated calls cautioning them to move away from Hezbollah's weapons caches. But Lebanese civilians could not know how close they were to potential military targets, human rights groups said. UNIFIL, which is the U.N. peacekeeping force in Lebanon, has "grave concern for the safety of civilians in southern Lebanon" amid what it called "the most intense Israeli bombing campaign" since Oct. 7.

As it continues its genocidal campaign in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Israel is demonstrating that it is fully prepared to commit war crimes in Lebanon as well. In addition to their illegality, Israel's actions imperil the entire region, and indeed, the world.

**Marjorie Cohn is professor emerita at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, dean of the People's Academy of International Law and past president of the National Lawyers Guild. She sits on the national advisory boards of Assange Defense and Veterans For Peace. A member of the bureau of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, she is the U.S. representative to the continental advisory council of the Association of American Jurists. Her books include *Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral and Geopolitical Issues*.**

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Truthout

September 26, 2024