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Open letter to the Security Council

Dear Ambassador,

I am writing to urge you and all other members of the Security Council to take immediate action to address the grave situation in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel. We are deeply concerned about the safety of the civilian populations in the area and especially for the 1.5 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip who cannot leave Gaza and who are facing a humanitarian crisis, as confirmed by UN agencies and humanitarian organizations.

A key responsibility of the Security Council is to help ensure respect for international human rights and humanitarian law by any party involved in hostilities. Both sides' actions constitute violations of these international obligations. The unlawful rocket attacks by Palestinian armed groups against towns and villages in southern Israel must be unequivocally condemned and must cease. At the same time, Israel is carrying out vastly disproportionate attacks causing numerous civilian casualties which must also be condemned as unlawful and must cease. Some of the Israeli attacks have been directed at civilian buildings not being used for military purposes such as the Parliament building in Gaza City and the offices of newspapers and television stations affiliated with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, or have targeted civilians such as Police cadets. We urge the Council to adopt a resolution calling for an immediate halt to these abuses and demanding that both parties fully respect their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law.

Considering the desperate plight of the civilian population, the Security Council should also urge Israel to lift restrictions on the passage into Gaza of humanitarian aid and supplies of basic necessities for the civilian population. The quantities allowed into Gaza so far are nowhere near sufficient to meet the basic needs of the civilian population, more than half of whom are children.

Amnesty International also urges the Security Council to press Israel to allow immediately unfettered access to the Gaza Strip to humanitarian and human rights workers and journalists. They have not been allowed into Gaza by the Israeli authorities since the beginning of November, with the exception of a few journalists who were allowed in for a few days earlier in December. Humanitarian and human rights workers and journalists are urgently needed to independently assess needs and report on the situation on the ground, including abuses of international law. Amnesty International has been seeking access to the Gaza Strip since the beginning of the crisis but to date has not received authorization for passage into Gaza from the Israeli authorities.

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Finally, in seeking an end to the current crisis in Gaza, we believe it is important that the Security Council should consider calling for the deployment of international monitors whose functions must include verifying compliance with international law, including human rights and humanitarian law by both Israel and the Palestinian administration in Gaza.

Since the resumption of hostilities some 400 Palestinians, including more than 100 unarmed civilians, scores of them children, and some 165 members of the civil police who were not participating in hostilities, have been killed by Israeli forces. Furthermore, three Israeli civilians and one soldier have been killed by Palestinian armed groups. As Israeli forces are now engaged in a ground offensive in addition to the air and artillery attacks which continue on an unprecedented scale, the risks for the lives and safety of civilians continue to mount and the civilian population is in increasingly dire need of food, medical and other emergency assistance.

The Security Council must live up to its responsibility to take strong and decisive action to address this human rights and humanitarian crisis.

Yours sincerely,

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Head of Amnesty International Office at the United Nations