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IDF admits targeting civilian areas in Lebanon with cluster bombs

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The Israel Defense Forces discovered that there had been "irregularities" in the use of cluster munitions, even before the end of the recent Lebanon war, sources in the defense minister's office said Monday. As a result of this information, Defense Minister Amir Peretz ordered an "extensive inquiry" into the use of these munitions before the war's end.

Meanwhile, for the first time Monday, the IDF admitted targeting populated areas with cluster munitions. In a statement released by the IDF Spokesman's Office, "the use of cluster munitions against built-up areas was done only against military targets where rocket launches against Israel were identified and after taking steps to warn the civilian population."

The statements released by the minister's office contradict Israel Defense Forces' claims - made both during and after the war - regarding the use of cluster munitions.

One IDF version, which remained unchanged until earlier this week, held that the firing of cluster munitions was done in accordance with international law. Advertisement

On Sunday it was announced that an investigating officer, Brigadier General Michel Ben-Baruch, who was appointed to examine the issue, found that in some cases cluster munitions were used contrary to the orders of Chief of Staff Dan Halutz.

On the basis of these findings, also brought before the Military Advocate General, Brigadier General Avihai Mandelblit, a decision was made to appoint an investigating general to carry out an examination of the circumstances under which the use of cluster munitions was made.

Meanwhile, there is growing evidence that the IDF leadership, including the chief of staff's office, authorized the firing of cluster munitions against the areas in southern Lebanon struck by these weapons.

A commander of a Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) battery said they had fired many rockets against targets north of the Litani river, and that those targets had been described as "General Staff targets." This description was given to targets authorized by the chief of staff's office. Furthermore, the chief of staff's office also authorized the types of munitions that would be used.

The United Nations bomb dismantling teams have located many sites north of the Litani that were struck by cluster bombs, including populated areas.

Sources in the defense minister's office said that during the fighting, Peretz had been informed that the IDF used cluster bombs. "The defense minister demanded explanations and he was told that [the IDF] is abiding by international agreements and treaties," a statement from Peretz' office said.

A request made in September by Meretz MK Zahava Gal-On for clarifications regarding the use of cluster munitions has gone unanswered.

MK Ran Cohen (Meretz), a reservist colonel who commanded an artillery battalion during the first Lebanon war, said, according to his experience, the use of cluster munitions is "very unusual." As far as he was aware, he said, any use of such munitions requires authorization by the division commander or higher.

"This is a very serious matter," MK Cohen said. "If cluster bombs were used in populated areas, this constitutes an indescribable crime. There is no target that cannot be hit without cluster bombs. The massive use by the IDF of cluster bombs during the war suggests an absolute loss of control and hysteria."

Halutz orders probe into cluster bomb use

On Monday, Halutz named Major General Gershon Hacoheh to head a probe into the use of the bombs. Hacoheh was one of the commanders of the summer 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip.

"There is no question that one of the things that must be investigated is the way in which the orders were given and implemented."

"Were the orders explicit? I believe that they were."

Asked if he was surprised by the use of the bombs contrary to his orders, Halutz told reporters "I don't know if this is surprising - it is more disappointing."

Following reports first published in Haaretz regarding the scale of cluster bomb use, Halutz appointed Brigadier General Mishel Ben Baruch to head a probe into the use of the weapons.

The inquiry's findings were handed over to Halutz and IDF Advocate General Avichai Mendelblit, who will determine whether the case merits court-martial proceedings.

Based on the findings, Halutz decided to appoint Hacoheh to investigate why field commanders blatantly disobeyed his orders.

The chief of staff's decision to appoint an inquiry was first reported Sunday evening by Channel 1.

Each rocket or shell can contain as many as several hundred bomblets, which are meant to disperse over an area of hundreds of square meters, exploding as they hit the ground.

Since the cease-fire went into effect on August 14, at least 22 civilians, including many children, have been killed and 134 others injured by unexploded bomblets.

To date, roughly 58,000 unexploded bomblets have been discovered at about 800 different sites in southern Lebanon. Most are near populated areas.

The United Nations demining unit believes that as much as 30 to 40 percent of bomblets may be duds. This translates into hundreds of thousands of unexploded bomblets throughout southern Lebanon, which endanger the lives of residents and block farmers from working their land.

According to testimony of an MLRS battery commander published in Haaretz, MLRS rockets were heavily used, even though they are known to be very inaccurate - the rockets may deviate up to 1,200 meters from their target - and a substantial percentage of the bomblets are known not to explode, thus becoming mines. In light of this, most experts view cluster ammunitions to be "non-discerning" weapons prohibited for use in a civilian environment.

According to the officer, in order to compensate for the rockets' lack of precision, they were told to "flood" the area with them. "We have no option of striking an isolated target, and the commanders know this very well," he said.