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Gaza: ICRC demands urgent access to wounded as Israeli army fails to assist wounded Palestinians

Geneva/Jerusalem/Tel Aviv (ICRC) - On the afternoon of 7 January, four Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) ambulances and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) managed to obtain access for the first time to several houses in the Zaytun neighbourhood of Gaza City that had been affected by Israeli shelling. The ICRC had requested safe passage for ambulances to access this neighbourhood since 3 January but it only received permission to do so from the Israeli Defence Forces during the afternoon of 7 January.

The ICRC/PRCS team found four small children next to their dead mothers in one of the houses. They were too weak to stand up on their own. One man was also found alive, too weak to stand up. In all there were at least 12 corpses lying on mattresses.

In another house, the ICRC/PRCS rescue team found 15 other survivors of this attack including several wounded. In yet another house, they found an additional three corpses. Israeli soldiers posted at a military position some 80 meters away from this house ordered the rescue team to leave the area which they refused to do. There were several other positions of the Israeli Defence Forces nearby as well as two tanks.

"This is a shocking incident," said Pierre Wettach, the ICRC's Head of Delegation for Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. "The Israeli military must have been aware of the situation but did not assist the wounded. Neither did they make it possible for us or the Palestine Red Crescent to assist the wounded."

Large earth walls erected by the Israeli army had made it impossible to bring ambulances into the neighbourhood. Therefore, the children and the wounded had to be taken to the ambulances on a donkey cart. In total, the ICRC/PRCS rescue team evacuated 18 wounded and 12 others who were extremely exhausted. Two corpses were also evacuated. The ICRC/PRCS will recover the remaining corpses on Thursday.

The ICRC was informed that there are more wounded sheltering in other destroyed houses in this neighbourhood. It demands that the Israeli military grant it and PRCS ambulances safe passage

and access immediately to search for any other wounded. Until now, the ICRC has still not received confirmation from the Israeli authorities that this will be allowed.

The ICRC believes that in this instance the Israeli military failed to meet its obligation under international humanitarian law to care for and evacuate the wounded. It considers the delay in allowing rescue services access unacceptable.

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