Israel-Hamas war

UN officials call for probe into reports of mass graves at Gaza hospitals

Human rights chief says he is horrified by destruction at Nasser and al-Shifa medical facilities

Bodies are unearthed at Nasser hospital in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip © AFP/Getty Images

James Shotter in Jerusalem YESTERDAY

Senior UN officials have called for an investigation into reports that hundreds of bodies had been unearthed from mass graves at two hospitals in Gaza amid the war between Israel and Hamas in the enclave.

UN human rights chief Volker Türk said he was horrified by the destruction at Nasser hospital in Khan Younis and al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City, and called for an independent probe into the deaths of the people found there.

"Given the prevailing climate of impunity, this [investigation] should include international investigators," Türk said on Tuesday.

"Hospitals are entitled to very special protection under international humanitarian law. And the intentional killing of civilians, detainees, and others who are hors de combat is a war crime."

A spokesman for UN secretary-general António Guterres said reports of the mass graves at Nasser and al-Shifa were "extremely troubling", and called for a "credible and independent" investigation.

Nasser hospital, the largest medical facility in southern Gaza, was the site of an Israel Defense Forces raid in February, which Israeli officials said at the time was part of the

search for hostages captured by Hamas during its assault on the Jewish state on October 7.

Hamas officials said on Monday that 283 bodies, including women and the elderly, had been recovered at Nasser over the preceding three days, and accused Israeli forces of "deliberately" hiding them by burying them "deep in the sand".

They added that 42 bodies had been identified and that work continued to recover more.

The Financial Times could not independently verify the claims, and it was not clear when or by whom the graves had been dug.

The IDF said that while it had "examined" bodies "buried by Palestinians" at Nasser as part of an effort to discover the fate of Israelis kidnapped by Hamas on October 7, the claim it had buried Palestinian bodies at the hospital was "baseless and

the claim it had buried Palestinian bodies at the hospital was "baseless and unfounded".

"The examination was conducted in a careful manner and exclusively in places where intelligence indicated the possible presence of hostages," the IDF added.

"The examination was carried out in a [respectful way] while maintaining the dignity of the deceased. Bodies examined, which did not belong to Israeli hostages, were returned to their place."

Palestinian health workers pull bodies from mass graves at Nasser hospital © Ahmed Salem/Bloomberg

The IDF did not comment about the situation at al-Shifa hospital.

Health officials in Gaza have been burying bodies in or near the compounds of hospitals during the war as they struggle to cope with the number of people being killed and the devastation in the Palestinian territory.

Israel launched its military offensive against Hamas in Gaza after the Palestinian militant group stormed into the Jewish state on October 7, and rampaged through villages in the south of the country, killing 1,200 people and taking 250 hostage, according to Israeli officials.

Israel's offensive has killed more than 34,000 people in Gaza, according to Palestinian officials, displaced 1.7mn of its 2.3mn inhabitants, and fuelled a humanitarian catastrophe in the enclave.

The IDF has raided numerous hospitals, accusing Hamas of using them for military purposes.

However, aid agencies say the raids have all but destroyed the enclave's health infrastructure and left huge numbers of Gazans with no access to medical care.

Only 11 of the 36 hospitals that existed in the territory before the war still function even partially, according to the UN.