Israel-Hamas war

Video contradicts Israel's version of killing of paramedics in Gaza

Military admits initial account of incident was inaccurate after Palestine Red Crescent releases footage of 'massacre'

Palestinians at Nasser hospital in Khan Younis mourn medics who were killed by Israeli fire while on a rescue mission © Hatem Khaled/Reuters

James Shotter in Jerusalem

Published APR 6 2025

The Israeli military has backtracked after video footage contradicted its account of its killing of 15 Palestinian emergency workers in Gaza last month, an incident that has provoked international outrage.

Israeli forces shot dead 15 paramedics and first responders near the southern Gazan city of Rafah in the early hours of March 23, before burying their bodies in a shallow grave where the crushed remains of their vehicles were also found.

Volker Türk, the UN's high commissioner for human rights, said last week the killings "raise further concerns over the commission of war crimes by the Israeli military".

The Israel Defense Forces initially claimed its soldiers had fired on the convoy because it was moving "suspiciously towards [Israeli] troops" and "without prior co-ordination and without headlights or emergency signals".

However, the Palestine Red Crescent Society over the weekend published a video found on the mobile phone of one of the emergency workers after his body was recovered from the mass grave. It showed that the ambulances and fire engine were clearly marked, and had their lights and emergency signals on, when they came under

clearly marked, and had their lights and emergency signals on, when they came under fire.

After the emergency workers, who were wearing uniforms, get out of their vehicles, the convoy immediately comes under fire, the video shows. As the shooting continues, the owner of the phone, his voice increasingly desperate, can be heard saying prayers Muslims traditionally recite before their death.

"Forgive me, mother, this is the path I chose mother, to help people," he says.

The Palestine Red Crescent Society described the killings as a "massacre".

PLAY | 02:00

WARNING: Graphic content - A clip from a video obtained from the phone of a paramedic killed in Gaza by Israeli forces © Palestine Red Crescent/Reuters

In a briefing for journalists after the video was released, an Israeli military official admitted its initial account of the killings was inaccurate and said the claim that the vehicles' emergency signals were not turned on was based on testimony from the unit involved in the incident.

"What we understand currently is [that] the person who gave the initial account was mistaken. We're trying to understand why," the official said.

At a briefing last week, Jonathan Whittall, head of the UN's humanitarian agency OCHA's office for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, said the staff had been dispatched to Rafah as Israeli forces were advancing in the area.
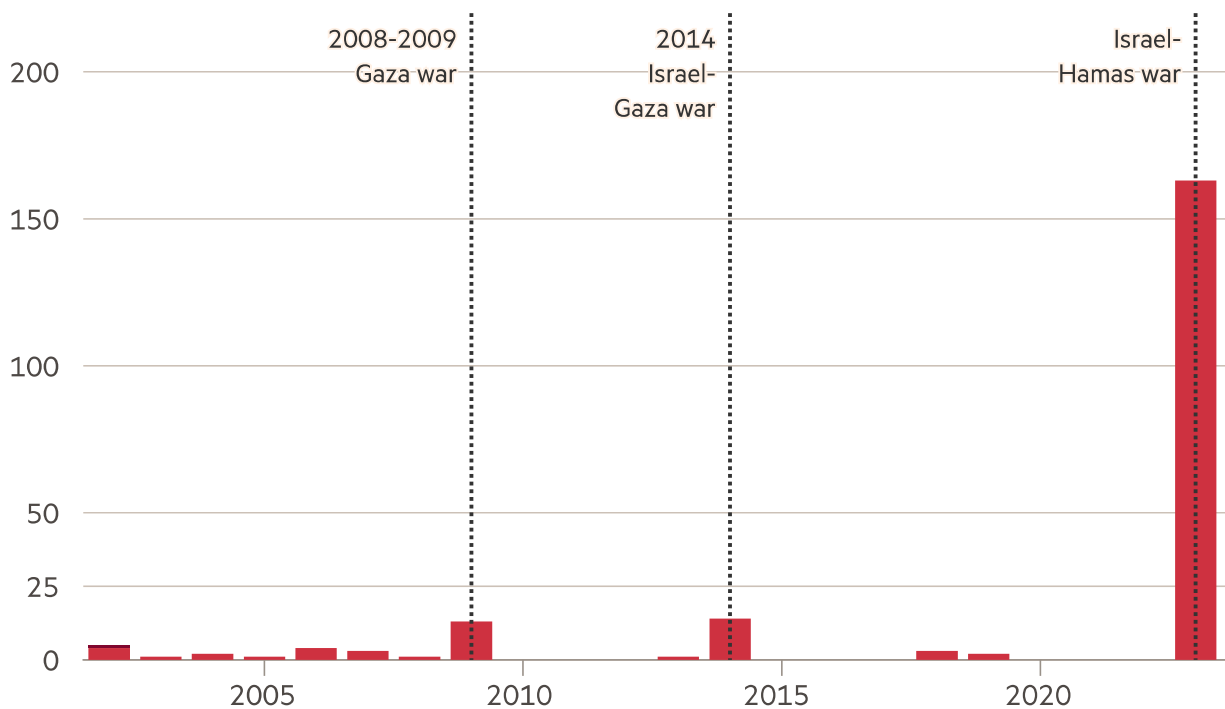
"The ambulances were hit one by one as they advanced, as they entered into Rafah," he said. "I think [this case] is very emblematic of the point that we've reached in Gaza.

What is happening here, it defies decency, it defies humanity, it defies the law. It really is a war without limits."

"We've had UN premises that have been shelled by tank fire, killing one of our colleagues and seriously injuring others," Whittall added. "We've had international aid compounds and hospitals that have been hit."

The death toll of aid workers in the Israel-Hamas war is unprecedented

Number of national and international aid workers killed in Palestinian territories

Israel insists that it complies with international law in Gaza.

The Israeli military official told journalists that a preliminary investigation found that troops had ambushed a car at around 04:00 on March 23 carrying three people whom the official alleged were members of Hamas.

The troops remained in position, according to the official, and were informed by an aerial surveillance team about two hours later that what they claimed was a suspicious group of vehicles was approaching, and opened fire.

The initial IDF statement said the emergency convoy had approached "a few minutes"

after they had fired on the first vehicle.

After firing at the emergency vehicles, soldiers approached the bodies of the paramedics and identified "[some] of them" as militants, the official said, without providing any details of what evidence had led to this conclusion.

The official denied reports that the workers had been bound or shot from close range, and denied that soldiers had attempted to cover up the incident.

The official added that the bodies had been covered with sand to prevent them being desecrated by animals, and that the vehicles of the emergency workers had been crushed as they were moved from the road by a heavy engineering vehicle — but was unable to explain why the emergency vehicles had also been buried along with the bodies of the paramedics.

The incident took place barely a week after Israel broke a two-month-old truce with Hamas, renewing its offensive in Gaza and imposing a siege on the shattered Palestinian enclave. The offensive has so far killed more than 50,000 people, according to Palestinian officials, as well as creating a humanitarian crisis in the territory.

Israel launched the offensive in response to Hamas's October 7 2023 attack on Israel, during which militants killed 1,200 people, according to Israeli officials, and took 250 hostage.

Data visualisation by Aditi Bhandari

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James Shotter