Gaza Beach – When Politics Trumps Human Rights

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The debate over the cause of the explosion on a Gaza beach, on June 9 which killed eight Palestinian civilians, has become a *cause célèbre* among human rights groups, journalists and politicians. In Cairo, London, Moscow, New York and Sydney, activists and politicians have condemned Israel's "excessive" and "brutal" military tactics. The UN secretary-general, the British foreign secretary and other foreign leaders immediately joined the Palestinians in blaming Israel for the explosion and tragic deaths, and the movement for another anti-Israel UN resolution began.

These condemnations have been magnified by the efforts of human rights organisations, particularly a group known as Human Rights Watch (HRW). Within a few hours of the Palestinian reports, HRW announced its own investigation of the incident, and within a week, had issued three press releases. The first left no room for doubt - the Palestinians had been killed by an Israel Defence Forces (IDF) 155 mm artillery shell fired in response to Palestinian missile attacks. These "findings" were widely quoted by the international media and have had significant impact in shaping the public perception of the incident.

However, the Israeli military launched its own investigation, producing detailed evidence that the evidence presented by the Palestinians and HRW was doctored.

The shrapnel wounds from two gravely injured Palestinian victims taken to Israeli hospitals for treatment (notably omitted in all of HRW's reports) were not from 155mm shells. (Doctors reported that before they arrived in Israel, the victims had undergone extensive surgery apparently in a failed effort to remove these metal pieces.)

Questions were also raised about the "evidence" allegedly presented by the Palestinian police and "independent journalists" which provided the basis for the condemnation of Israel. A Palestinian video, allegedly showing Israeli naval ships firing at Gaza, was exposed as a fake and led to confusion on the alleged source of the explosion. Others suggested that the girl shown in the video frantically calling for her father was acting: the cameraman claimed she had been in the water at the time of the explosion, however her clothes were completely dry.

Faced with this evidence and the contradictions, HRW's self-proclaimed "military expert" backtracked, now claiming "the most likely cause [of the blast] was unexploded Israeli ordinance". The more likely explanation - that the explosion was the result of a Palestinian mine - was politically unacceptable for HRW's officials.

While the details of the Gaza beach incident remain subject to debate, the political agenda that has distorted human rights around the world is clear.

After the Gaza beach incident on June 9, 68 civilians on a bus were killed by a land mine reportedly planted by the Tamil Tigers in northern Sri Lanka, 30 civilians were killed by the Taliban in southern Afghanistan, and tribesman in the restive Pakistani province of Balochistan claimed that Pakistani forces had killed 17 civilians in an ongoing military operation in the region. These have not received even a cursory report by groups such as Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International. HRW also failed to call for independent investigations in these cases - such treatment is apparently reserved for Israel.

This incident has also exposed the power of the human rights organisations to influence public opinion. As a result of the "halo effect", journalists rarely question the credibility of

NGOs. Enjoying Special Consultative status at the UN, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are able to parlay their huge budgets directly into political influence. If these and other human rights organisations are to retain their credibility, political campaigns on behalf of Palestinians or any other groups must end.