

August 7, 2014

Mr. Matthias Behnke
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Palais des Nations
CH-1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland

Dear Mr. Behnke:

We write on behalf of B'nai B'rith International, an ECOSOC-accredited non-governmental organization with special consultative status as well as additional United Nations accreditations. Our 170-year-old humanitarian organization, headquartered in Washington and present in over 50 countries, is distinguished by a dedicated Office of United Nations Affairs and by on-the-ground representation at multiple UN institutions, including those in Geneva.

On August 6, 2014, the *New York Times* reported that press outlets “generally rely on the United Nations’ estimate of civilians killed” in describing the results in the Gaza Strip of intensified hostilities between Israel and such terrorist movements as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The *Times* relayed your indication that relevant UN figures are the product of research by “human rights groups” – but that you “declined to say how many, which ones or what methods they used.”

As you know, assertions of casualty figures and of a breakdown of combatant and non-combatant casualties – as well as the circumstances in which any of these occur – have extremely serious implications, both for assessing humanitarian needs and for the ability of a respective military force to engage, free of damaging impairments and allegations, in legitimate and necessary operations. There is very significant reason for vigilance against misinformation or concealment of information particularly amid ongoing urban combat in a context such as Gaza, where entities operate under the dominance of an extremist non-state actor whose chief prospective leverage lies in saddling a state adversary with perceived responsibility for avoidable civilian casualties.

Accordingly – and particularly as transparency and accountability have frequently been demanded of Israel – it is vital that you openly and fully account for your relevant data and how it is calculated and verified.

During times when the United Nations cannot establish the veracity of its “estimates” – or cannot provide assurances that data is uninfluenced by “local authorities” controlled in whole or in part by non-state belligerents – we expect UN bodies to desist from

circulating information that can impair defensive efforts and irresponsibly embolden those committed to recurring conflict that ensnares Israeli and Palestinian civilians alike.

Since news outlets and many others are liable to omit or overlook disclaimers, it does not suffice to periodically note, as you did to the *Times*, that figures are not “absolute and final.” It certainly is unacceptable to assert, as you were quoted as saying by the *Times*, that “[g]etting information about people who are dead is not that complicated because everybody knows everybody” in Gaza.

After all, for obvious reasons – and not only the fact that terrorist organizations specifically aim *not* to distinguish their operatives during a period of conflict and international attention – almost no residents of Gaza have acknowledged to reporters the presence of Palestinian combatants in, and the launching of anti-Israel attacks from, their areas where “everybody knows everybody.” Images of identifiable Palestinian combatants and terrorist activity were all but absent from international media coverage of the conflict, despite the undeniable, and formidable, campaign of rocket attacks and cross-border tunnel infiltrations directed from Gaza at Israel’s citizens.

Finally, it should go without saying that it cannot suffice for UN bodies to corroborate and prospectively correct essential data weeks or months after their issuance with often far-reaching and immediate political and operative consequences – and this is to say nothing of the stoked regional and international tensions that can result.

We look forward to your prompt reply and to your comprehensive accounting of casualty figures broadcast by the United Nations while counterterrorism-related hostilities are still in progress.

Sincerely,

Daniel S. Mariaschin
Executive Vice President

David J. Michaels
Director of UN and Intercommunal Affairs