

STATEMENT BY ALVARO DE SOTO, UNITED NATIONS MIDDLE EAST ENVOY

"The UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Alvaro de Soto, is deeply shocked and appalled by the IDF military action early today, in which a house in a residential area in Beit Hanoun was destroyed by a tank shell, killing at least 18 civilians including many women and children.

Last Friday UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had expressed his deep concern about the rising death toll caused by the Israeli military operation in northern Gaza, given that such operations inevitably cause civilian casualties. During the weekend the Secretary-General had raised the matter by telephone at the highest level of the Israeli government, and received assurances that no operation would be launched that was not essential to stop the firing of rockets. We were relieved at the announcement only yesterday of the withdrawal of the IDF from Beit Hanoun.

In this light the UN Special Coordinator cannot but express his condemnation and call upon Israeli government to call off these and other military operations without delay. The Palestinian side should cease attacks against Israeli targets. Our hearts go out today to the victims of this deed and to those they have left behind."

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