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International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) Statement on the Use of White Phosphorus by Israeli Forces in Gaza, December 2008 / January 2009.

IPPNW notes with grave concern the use of white phosphorus by Israeli forces in the recent war against Gaza. As physicians committed to reducing the suffering brought by warfare, we recognise the inhumane and indiscriminate effects of white phosphorus, and strongly condemn its use in armed conflict under any circumstances.

White Phosphorus (WP) ignites spontaneously in air, the resultant oxide combining rapidly with moisture to form droplets which produce a very effective smoke screen. On contact with skin, WP causes painful and deep chemical burns, often extending to bone that are very slow to heal. Such burns, or the inhalation of WP droplets that can cause severe damage to the airways, are often fatal.

WP's military utility stems from both its smoke-screening and its incendiary properties. It has been used for both purposes many times since 1916, including against Dresden, Hamburg and Cherbourg in the Second World War; by Iraqi forces, principally as ground-bursts, in the 1980s war against Iran, by US forces against Fallujah in Iraq in 2004; and now by Israeli forces in Gaza, often as air-bursts.

IPPNW calls for a ban on the use of white phosphorus in armed conflict. Its use against positions holding many civilians (including children), must be particularly condemned, its inhumane medical effects are such that its use in weaponry can never be justified.

IPPNW notes that the use of WP is not regarded as illegal under the Chemical Weapons Convention as it is deemed to be a conventional weapon for creating smoke screens. However weapons which "may be deemed to be excessively injurious or to have indiscriminate effects" are also banned by Protocol III of the "Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons". Noting that WP causes injuries that are both excessively injurious and indiscriminate, and that these effects are entirely predictable when the weapon is used, IPPNW calls for the explicit and complete banning of WP from armed conflict, and for its use to be prohibited by the Chemical Weapons Convention and recognised as a criminal offence under international law

International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985, is a non-partisan, global federation of national affiliates in more than 60 countries, including Israel and Palestine, dedicated to research, education and advocacy, relevant to the prevention of all wars. To this end, IPPNW seeks to promote non-violent conflict resolution and to minimize the effects of war. IPPNW has long advocated a peaceful and just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has developed a Medical Roadmap for peace in the Middle East.

Helsinki, Moscow, and Stockholm on February 6, 2009

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