UN official says Israel and Hamas are committing war crimes

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By Josh Hailprin, AP

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The U.N.’s top human rights official accused both Israel and Hamas militants of committing war crimes in the latest Gaza war, but reserved her harshest words for the Israeli government, which she said Thursday was deliberately defying international law.

U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said that by placing and firing rockets within heavily populated areas both sides are committing “a violation of international humanitarian law, therefore a war crime.”

“Locating rockets within schools and hospitals, or even launching these rockets from densely populated areas are violations of international humanitarian law,” Pillay said, referring to Hamas, but added that doesn’t “absolve” Israel from disregarding the same law.

Around 1,300 Palestinians, mostly civilians, and 59 Israelis, mainly soldiers, have been killed in the latest violence.

Israeli’s initial aerial campaign against Hamas broadened to a ground offensive on July 17. Pillay said the government has defied international law in Gaza by attacking civilian areas with schools, hospitals, homes and U.N. facilities.

“None of this appears to me to be accidental,” Pillay said of Israel at a news conference in Geneva to mark the end of her six-year term. “They appear to be defying - deliberate defiance of - obligations that international law imposes on Israel.”

She also criticized Israel’s strikes on Gaza’s power plant, sewer systems and water wells as part of a similar pattern of destruction during the 2009 Gaza war.

“What I’m seeing now is a recurrence of the very acts that the Gaza fact-finding mission indicated as constituting war crimes and crimes against humanity,” she said.

Pillay also took aim at the U.S., Israel’s main ally, for providing financial support for Israel’s Iron Dome anti-rocket defense system.

“No such protection has been provided to Gazans against the shelling,” she said.