Israel Opens First Investigation of Senior Officer Over Gaza War

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Israel is set to launch its first investigation of a senior IDF commander for alleged criminal decisions during last summer’s Gaza war.

Lt. Col. Neria Yeshurun will face allegations that he ordered the shelling of a medical clinic in the northern Gaza City neighborhood of Shejaiya in retribution for the death of one of his soldiers killed the previous day by a Hamas sniper firing from the clinic, Ynet reported on Saturday.

The investigation into Yeshurun is one of three new criminal investigations into IDF conduct during the Gaza war [opened by the Military Advocate General last month](http://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-to-open-investigation-into-gaza-cafe-bombing/).

Army investigators will review allegations that one day after Capt. Dimitri Levitas was shot by a Palestinian sniper hiding atop the clinic, Yeshurun ordered the heavy strike on the complex as a way to honor his slain comrade.

“We decided to fire a barrage of shells at the place [from which] we believed his life was taken, but life has a rhythm of its own, and a second after we began firing, we received incoming fire,” Yeshurun told one army newspaper, Bayabasha (“On Land”), in a post-war interview.

According to Palestinian sources, the July 23 strike on the medical facility killed five people, four of whom were civilians, and injured 45 others.

In a recording of an internal IDF communication obtained by the Israeli website NRG at the time, Yeshurun can be heard instructing his soldiers to salute Levitas’s memory in lieu of attending his funeral taking place that same day. Due to ongoing operations, the soldiers of Levitas’s unit could not be released to attend the funeral.

“I would like for us, here, in the middle of Shejaiya in Gaza to join in with those accompanying Dima on his final journey, and shoot a barrage of honor to salute our officer,” he can be heard saying with a shaky voice.

According to media reports, Yeshurun did not dispute his statements, but said the decision to bombard the building was not actually taken for the reasons he gave his troops. Following the June announcement of the MAG’s newest investigations, he told NRG that his decision to shell the clinic was part of a wider operation targeting Hamas fighters who were hiding in the area. He claimed his reference to Levitas was only meant to raise morale among troops unable to attend the funeral.

A number of Yeshurun’s soldiers interviewed by Ynet stood by their commander and praised his leadership during the 50-day war. One officer called the incident “the closing of a circle” and told the website the strike was not ordered out of vindictiveness. Another praised Yeshurun as the “commander that all soldiers wanted to have.”

“Turning him into a suspect makes all of us in the battalion suspects,” said an officer identified only as “A.”

In recent months, a Facebook page in support of Yeshurun emerged online, garnering thousands of likes and messages of support for the senior officer.

In one comment, an IDF soldier called Hamas “despicable” for “conveniently” positioning snipers at a medical center with full knowledge that Israel would retaliate for shooting at its soldiers. Others said that Israel was morally obligated to defend its soldiers against such accusations due to the heavy price its soldiers paid to defend the country from terrorism.

In addition to the shelling of the medical clinic, the Military Advocate General, Maj. Gen. Danny Efroni, announced the opening of two additional criminal investigations.

One concerns a military bombardment of a café in Khan Younis that resulted in the deaths of nine Palestinians. The July 10 bombing killed fans who had been watching a World Cup semi-final between Holland and Argentina, according to eyewitnesses.

The other incident involves allegations of IDF abuse of a Palestinian detainee.

Seven criminal investigations have already been opened into soldiers’ actions during the summer campaign, including the bombing of a United Nations school that, according to Palestinians, killed 21 civilians and injured dozens.

Last month, Efroni also announced the closing of a number of investigations, including a probe into a shelling of a Gaza beach that left four children dead on July 16.

Efroni said the probe into the children’s deaths “accorded with Israeli domestic law and international law requirements,” and the children, who were seen running into the compound, were mistaken for Hamas naval forces known to operate in the area.

Eyewitnesses said the children had been playing on the beach, and had tried unsuccessfully to outrun the shelling.

In April, the Military Prosecution filed an indictment with a military court against three soldiers suspected of looting the homes of Palestinian civilians during the fighting.

The case marked the first instance of charges pressed against IDF troops who participated in combat in the Gaza Strip during Operation Protective Edge.

The 50-day war killed more than 2,100 Palestinians, many of them civilians, according to Palestinian sources in the Hamas-run Gaza Strip, and 73 Israelis, 66 of them soldiers.

Israel has said about half of those killed in Gaza were combatants and blamed Hamas for all civilian casualties, noting that it placed military infrastructure in residential areas throughout the coastal territory.

Israel launched the operation in Gaza last summer in what it said was a mission to halt relentless rocket fire by Hamas terrorists. Hamas seized control of Gaza in a violent coup against the Palestinian Authority in 2007.