

NGOs air concerns over strife in Gaza Strip

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Japanese nongovernmental organizations and Diet members expressed serious concern Tuesday over the conflict-ravaged Gaza Strip, urging the government and the international community to be more proactive in working toward peace in the Middle East.

The event, cohosted by several human rights groups, including Amnesty International Japan and Human Rights Now, was held while Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was in Japan for meetings with Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama and Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada.

Kazuko Ito, secretary general of Human Rights Now, stressed that the International Human Rights Law may have been violated during fighting in the Gaza Strip between December 2008 and January 2009. According to the organizers,

the conflict ended in the death of about 1,400 people, of whom only 13 were Israelis.

"It is said that out of the 1,400 casualties, many of them were women and children, innocent civilians," Ito said during the meeting. "There is suspicion that (the conflict) was a serious violation of the Geneva Conventions and a war crime. But despite the number of deaths, no one has been held responsible."

In response to the Gaza conflict, the U.N. Human Rights Council has adopted two resolutions, beginning with one in January 2009 that strongly condemned the Israeli military operation and demanded that it immediately withdraw its troops from Gaza and open the borders to allow humanitarian aid to get in.

The resolution, which included the dispatch of an independent fact-finding mission, was adopted by 33 nations, including Russia, Jordan, China

and Egypt, but Japan and 12 other countries abstained from voting.

Foreign Ministry official Mitsuko Shino, who was also present at Tuesday's meeting, explained that while Tokyo was disappointed that the conflict in Gaza resulted in many casualties and echoed the necessity of finding out what really happened, she pointed out that the U.N. resolution had already pointed its finger at Israel.

"What we found to be a problem in the resolution was that even before the fact-finding mission went to investigate, it already hinted who was to blame," Shino argued.