UNRWA Gaza chief recalled after uproar over claim that IDF strikes ‘precise’

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The head of the UN Palestinian refugee agency’s mission in Gaza has been recalled from his post following an uproar in the coastal enclave after he told Israeli TV that IDF strikes during last month’s 11-day war appeared to be “precise” and “sophisticated.”

Matthias Schmale, along with his deputy David de Bold, left the Hamas-run coastal enclave on Wednesday, according to Channel 12, the network to which the UNRWA director made the original comments last month. The interview led to accusations from Gaza rulers Hamas that he was exonerating Israel for the deaths of Palestinian civilians, prompting Schmale to apologize.

A spokesman for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency told Channel 12 that Schmale had been called back to Jerusalem for consultations and had decided to take an extended leave of absence.

De Bold was also deemed persona non grata by Hamas, according to Palestinian media, which said the terror group was demanding that both he and Schmale be fired.

The UNRWA spokesman told Channel 12 that De Bold would continue his job remotely from Jerusalem and that Deputy Commissioner-General Leni Stenseth would run the Gaza office on-site in the interim.

A protest scheduled outside UNRWA’s headquarters for Wednesday was canceled following Schmale’s departure.

In the May 23 interview, Schmale was asked about the IDF’s assertion that its military strikes were very precise. He responded: “I’m not a military expert but I would not dispute that. I also have the impression that there is a huge sophistication in the way the Israeli military struck over the last 11 days.”

He also said that there were not currently any shortages of food, medicine or water in Gaza as Israel had reopened the crossings.

In the interview, Schmale said that despite their accuracy, the strikes in the latest conflict were much more “vicious” than in the 2014 war.

“So yes they did not hit, with some exceptions, civilian targets, but the viciousness and ferocity of the strikes were heavily felt,” he said, adding that more than 60 children were killed, including 19 who went to an UNRWA school.

“So the precision was there, but there was an unacceptable and unbearable loss of life on the civilian side,” he said.

Despite his clarification, the remarks drew outrage from Palestinians.

Hamas said in a statement that his “comments are a complete distortion in favor of the Zionists, including an attempt to exonerate the Occupation of the murder of 254 Palestinians, more than 40% of them children, women and the elderly.”

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza said at least 243 Palestinians were killed, including 66 children and teens, with 1,910 people wounded. It does not differentiate between terror group members and civilians. The Israeli military maintained that it killed some 225 terrorist operatives and that the Palestinian death toll was in fact considerably higher than was reported. It also said some of the civilian fatalities were caused by Hamas rockets falling short and landing in the Strip.

Thirteen people were killed in Israel, all but one of them civilians, including a 5-year-old boy and a 16-year-old girl. Some 357 people in Israel were wounded. Terror groups in Gaza fired more than 4,300 rockets at Israel during the fighting.

Other Palestinian groups also protested Schmale’s comments.

In a [joint statement](https://www.pchrgaza.org/en/phroc-and-pngo-condemn-statements-of-the-unrwa-gaza-director-on-israels-aggression-on-the-gaza-strip/) two days after the interview, several Palestinian rights groups said the remarks “completely ignored the crimes committed during the latest Israeli offensive against Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip.”

They accused Schmale of “indirectly praising the precision and sophistication of the Israeli army, when Israel is in fact constantly committing war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Palestinian people.”

Later that day, Schmale issued an apology.

“Recent remarks I made on Israeli TV have offended & hurt those who had family members & friends killed & injured during the war that has just ended. I truly regret to have caused them pain, & reiterate following points I have made through countless interviews & tweets,” he tweeted.

“There is no justification whatsoever for killing civilians. Any civilian killed is one too many. It is simply unbearable that so many innocent people have paid with their lives,” he said, adding that “military precision and sophistication are never a justification for war.”

“Many people were killed or have been severely injured by direct strikes or collateral damage from strikes. In a place as densely populated as Gaza, any strike will have huge, damaging effects on people and buildings,” he said.

Israeli military officials acknowledge that many Palestinian civilian casualties were indeed caused — directly or indirectly — by Israeli bombs. In one case, in which at least 10 people including eight children were killed in the Shati refugee camp, the IDF believes a missile strike on an underground bunker caused the ground above to give way, collapsing the homes of at least two families.

The military describes such civilian casualties as being the unfortunate result of Hamas’s strategy of intentionally operating within densely populated areas to use the residents as civilian shields. Human rights groups, however, regularly accuse Israel of using disproportionate force in such situations.