Former head of UN rights council to lead open-ended probe of Israel

July 22, 2021

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The Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/former-head-of-un-rights-council-to-lead-open-ended-probe-of-israel/>

Former United Nations human rights chief Navi Pillay will lead the UN’s unprecedented open-ended inquiry into “systematic” abuses in Israel and the Palestinian territories, it was announced on Thursday.

The president of the UN Human Rights Council said Pillay would lead a three-person investigation, intended to scrutinize alleged abuses and their “root causes” in the decades-long Middle East conflict.

The probe was triggered during a special session of the council on May 27 — following fighting between Israel and Palestinian terrorists in the Gaza Strip — when the UN Human Rights Council decided to establish a commission of inquiry to investigate “all alleged violations of international humanitarian law and all alleged violations and abuses of international human rights law” in Israel, East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza.

A commission of inquiry (COI) is the highest-level investigation that can be ordered by the Human Rights Council. The probe is the first such COI with an “ongoing” mandate.

The establishment of the commission was rejected at the time by Israel, which said it would not cooperate with such a probe. The Foreign Ministry said the move “completely ignores the 4,300 rockets toward Israeli citizens” fired from Gaza during the 11-day military conflict in May. It called the decision a “moral stain on the international community and the UN.”

It said it will “continue to defend itself against politically-biased entities that seek to undermine the legitimacy of legal and justified activity.”

Israel — backed at times by the United States — has long accused the UN rights council of anti-Israel bias, and has generally refused to cooperate with its investigators.

The commission was tasked with investigating “all underlying root causes of recurrent tensions, instability and protraction of conflict, including systematic discrimination and repression based on national, ethnic, racial or religious identity.”

The commissioners were mandated to get to the facts and circumstances surrounding violations and identify those responsible “with a view to ensuring that perpetrators of violations are held accountable.”

While the council has previously ordered eight investigations into rights violations committed in the Palestinian territories, this is the first with a mandate to examine “root causes” and probe systematic abuses.

The COI is set to report to the Human Rights Council each year from June 2022.

This commission is the first-ever open-ended COI — others, like the one on Syria, need their mandates renewed every year.

Pillay, the South African former judge, served as the UN high commissioner for human rights from 2008 to 2014.

She will be joined by Miloon Kothari of India, the first UN special rapporteur on adequate housing, and Australian international human rights law expert Chris Sidoti.