

Israel steps up military offensive in Gaza

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The Israeli government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is exploiting the open support of the Bush administration for its murderous campaign in Lebanon to further Israel's expansionist ambitions in the Occupied Territories. Far from resulting in any letup in the month-long attack on Gaza, Israel's war in Lebanon has been accompanied by a continuing and unrestrained offensive against the Palestinian people.

An Israeli ground and air operation in Gaza on Wednesday resulted in the deaths of 23 Palestinians, including at least seven civilians. The attack, codenamed "Pillars of Samson", resulted in one of the bloodiest days in the ongoing Israeli offensive in Gaza. Another five Palestinians, including a 75-year-old woman and a 12-year-old boy, were killed yesterday.

On Wednesday, about 30 tanks and military vehicles, backed up by other ground forces, invaded northern Gaza and approached the outskirts of Gaza City and the Jabaliya refugee camp. Israeli bulldozers destroyed Palestinian orchards and greenhouses while fighter jets bombed targets, including homes, in densely populated residential areas. Artillery shells hit the area at the rate of one per minute throughout the afternoon.

Many of the shells and missiles were directed at homes and apartment blocks, some of whom belonged to Palestinian militants. Of the fighters reported killed, eight were from Hamas, one from Islamic Jihad, and another from the Popular Resistance Committees.

A mentally handicapped young man and a three-year-old girl were among the civilian dead. In another incident, an Israeli artillery shell hit a Palestinian home near Jabaliya, killing a five-year-old girl, her eight-month-old sister, and the girls' mother.

Dozens of Palestinians were also wounded, many critically. One of the injured was a journalist, Ibrahim Al-Atla of the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation, who received shrapnel wounds in his back. Other civilians suffered more serious injuries, including severed limbs.

There have been reports—denied by Israel—that some of these injuries may have been caused by the deployment of cluster munitions in Gaza. "We were very surprised to note injuries of an unusual gravity," Dr. Regis Garrigues, head of the French humanitarian organisation Médecins du Monde in Palestine, told the *Libération* newspaper. "All this resembles the effects of cluster bombs released from drones carrying delayed explosion sub-munitions, very sophisticated weaponry that causes hellish damage and which should not be used against civilian populations."

Israeli use of cluster bombs in Lebanon has already been confirmed. The possible deployment of such weapons in Gazan residential areas highlights the criminal character of Israel's military operations. Olmert's government has given the military free reign to commit whatever war crimes it deems necessary, and has repudiated any conception that the precepts of international law are applicable to the Zionist state.

The Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem reported this week on the army's renewed use of Palestinian civilians as "human shields", in violation of both international and Israeli law. In an operation in the Gazan town of Beit Hanoun on July 17, Israeli soldiers seized homes and positioned the handcuffed residents at the entrances and staircases of the buildings. Six civilians, including two children, were held for twelve hours as the soldiers exchanged fire with Palestinian militants. One woman was forced to walk in front of soldiers as they searched apartments in one of the buildings.

Israel's targeting of civilians in the Occupied Territories is central to its strategy of cowing the entire Palestinian population and crushing all resistance to the occupation. The Olmert government has openly sought to inflict a devastating collective punishment in the aftermath of Hamas's victory in the Palestinian Authority's legislative council elections in January.

“Terror groups are under pressure when their men are killed,” an unnamed senior officer told the *Ynetnews* website, published by the right-wing Israeli daily newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*. “And in addition there is the harm to electricity systems, attacking infrastructure installations in Gaza, the dire economic situation, and the fact that Hamas officials are underground ... the population is starting to ask questions.”

The officer also admitted that the capture of the Israeli soldier by Palestinian militants last month was merely the pretext for the latest offensive, which has been underway for four weeks and has seen about 150 people killed and more than 500 wounded. “Today it is no secret that we would have carried out an operation like this even if the event in Kerem Shalom where two soldiers were killed and Corporal Gilad Shalit was kidnapped wouldn’t have taken place,” he declared.

Israel’s attacks in recent days again demonstrate that its operations in Gaza have nothing to do with freeing Shalit. Indeed, there is every reason to conclude that the timing and nature of the bombardment were calculated provocations designed to prevent the negotiation of an agreement for his release. Corporal Shalit’s continued detention serves as a convenient pretext for Israel’s ongoing military campaign in the Occupied Territories.

According to a report in the *Guardian* last Tuesday, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had secured an agreement with Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants in Gaza to free the captured soldier and stop firing Qassam rockets into Israel in return for the release of a number of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails at some point in the future. Abbas was reportedly given assurances by the Israeli government that it would free some Palestinian prisoners, albeit as a “goodwill gesture,” rather than as a direct exchange for the captured soldier.

The Olmert government then made its real attitude to a negotiated solution clear when it launched its ground and air invasion of northern Gaza the day after the *Guardian* report was published. The offensive has apparently destroyed any chance that the militants will release Shalit based on an Israeli promise of a future goodwill gesture.

The latest Israeli attacks have served to further humiliate President Abbas and reveal his complete powerlessness. The Olmert government has long insisted that it will not negotiate any agreement with

the Palestinian president concerning the future of the Occupied Territories. It is committed to unilaterally determining its borders by annexing East Jerusalem and much of the West Bank.

At the same time, Tel Aviv is stepping up its efforts to destroy the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority (PA), which no longer functions in any real sense. Israel, the US, and Europe have coordinated an international embargo that has led to a severe financial crisis in the PA. Many of the Authority’s 140,000 employees have not been paid for months, while about 30 Hamas parliamentarians, including seven cabinet members, remain detained in Israeli jails. Other elected representatives have been forced into hiding by the threat of arrest or assassination.

Abbas briefly met with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Ramallah last Tuesday, in a shameless effort to ingratiate himself with the Bush administration. Rice’s tour of the region was designed to quash any international pressure for a ceasefire in Lebanon and encourage Israel’s military operations in the interests of creating what she has called a “new Middle East”.

This did not prevent Abbas from embracing Rice. “I would like to welcome Dr. Rice and thank her for the efforts she’s making for a ceasefire and to implement a just and sustainable peace in the area,” he declared.

While Rice publicly expressed confidence in Abbas, Palestinian sources told *Haaretz* that she offered the president nothing, instead adding her voice to Israel’s demands. She reportedly insisted that Abbas work to disarm Hamas and other militant groups and said that Washington would not pressure Tel Aviv to call a ceasefire in the Occupied Territories until all Qassam rocket fire from Gaza had ceased.



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