

Israel tightens the siege of Gaza

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While the world's media has focused attention on Israel's four-week offensive in Lebanon, a no less ferocious assault is also underway in Gaza. The Palestinian territory's 1.4 million residents have been subjected to an unrelenting Israeli military offensive, as well as an air, land, and sea blockade which threatens a humanitarian catastrophe.

Seizing upon the pretext of the capture of Corporal Gilad Shalit by Palestinian militants on June 25, the Israeli military has mounted a six-week campaign aimed at annihilating the West Bank and Gaza's entire social, economic, and political infrastructure.

According to figures published in last Saturday's *Haaretz*, Israeli ground forces have fired 12,000 artillery shells into Gaza in the past five weeks. This is an average of more than 300 shells a day. In addition, at least 220 aerial strikes take place each day. Israeli ground forces, including infantry, tanks, and bulldozers have launched regular incursions into the area. This firepower is concentrated on one of the world's most densely populated areas, which is seven times smaller than Rhode Island, the smallest US state.

In the latest bombardment, Israeli forces have launched a sustained operation in Rafah in south Gaza over the past five days. Tanks and soldiers have taken over the area, conducting house-to-house searches, and destroying greenhouses and farmlands. Eight Palestinians were killed Saturday. At least three of these were civilians—including an eight-year-old boy—who were bombed as they fled Israeli gunfire.

Raids and assassinations have also taken place in the West Bank. In the latest provocation, two Hamas legislators, one of them Abdel Aziz Duaik, the speaker of the parliament, were kidnapped on the weekend. Israel has now imprisoned 33 parliamentarians, including eight Hamas cabinet members.

The Israeli military actions in Gaza and the West Bank demonstrate that its offensive has nothing to do

with recovering the captured soldier, or with preventing "terrorism". The government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has rejected repeated Hamas offers of a ceasefire, and has refused to accept proposals by Palestinian militants for a prisoner exchange. Every Palestinian offer is met with renewed Israeli bombardment.

Countless war crimes have been committed in Gaza. An investigation by the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem found that half of all those killed in the territory last month—178 people—were civilians. Hundreds of others have suffered terrible injuries. At one Gaza hospital, surgeons told the BBC that of 100 operations, one-third were amputations caused by Israeli attacks.

"There are many more mutilations requiring amputations as well as severe burns now than there were before," William Dufourcq from the aid organisation Médecins du Monde reported. "This means the hospitals stay full for longer and there is a greater need for skilled specialists as well as more drugs, which were already in short supply. These people will be handicapped for life."

July was the bloodiest month in the Occupied Territories since April 2002. In an indication of the one-sided nature of the "war", just one Israeli soldier has been killed in the past five weeks, and that was in a "friendly-fire" incident.

B'Tselem also catalogued a series of incidents in which Palestinian civilians, including children and the elderly, had been deliberately bombed by Israeli fighter planes and helicopters. Just as in Lebanon, Israel's offensive is calculated to terrorise the entire population and suppress all resistance to the Israeli occupation.

In a new tactic, the Israeli army now telephones Palestinian residents and warns them to flee their home just moments before it is bombed. While the military claims that this practice is designed to reduce civilian

casualties, it is in fact intended to instil fear into the thousands of families who receive such calls.

“Some families, convinced by such calls, have left their homes at two o’clock in the morning only to see them bombed directly by Israeli F-16 fighters,” *Al-Ahram Weekly* reported. “Others have abandoned their homes and seen them stand untouched. So fearful are they that they refuse to return in case bombings are merely delayed.”

The IDF has also dropped leaflets in many areas of Gaza demanding that people flee their homes. With every border sealed off, however, there is nowhere for people to go. That there is not an exodus from the Palestinian territory equivalent to that in Lebanon is due to the fact that Gazan residents are hemmed in on all sides by Israel.

The Israeli blockade has greatly exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the Occupied Territories. Nine UN humanitarian organisations working in Gaza last week issued a joint statement expressing their “deep alarm” at the impact of the ongoing violence. “We are concerned that with international attention focusing on Lebanon, the tragedy in Gaza is being forgotten,” the statement read.

One aid organisation reported that Israel was permitting just 150 food and aid trucks into Gaza each day—just enough to keep the population from starving. More than 400 daily truckloads are estimated to be required to meet people’s nutritional needs and provide some measure of food security.

Gaza is also suffering from worsening power and fuel shortages. Israel destroyed the territory’s only electricity station on June 28. Some Palestinian homes receive 6 to 8 hours of electricity each day, while others face constant blackouts. Several hospitals rely on generators to operate minimal services but are running out of fuel. Many medical services and operations have been cancelled, while hospitals’ food supplies, medicines, blood banks, and vaccines have been destroyed, as refrigerators no longer work.

Israeli attacks on Gaza’s infrastructure have also caused water shortages and damaged sewerage systems. Humanitarian organisations have warned of epidemics as a result of the increasingly unsanitary conditions in the territory.

Gaza’s economy has been crippled by Israeli border closures, and destruction of infrastructure, factories,

and farmlands. Poverty and unemployment have skyrocketed, following the imposition of the Israeli and international financial embargo of the Palestinian Authority following Hamas’s victory in the January elections. Many of the PA’s 140,000 employees have not received their wages in months.

The UN’s World Food Program has increased the number of people it feeds by 38 percent since the beginning of the year. Shortages have led to price rises, making basic foodstuffs unaffordable and threatening mass malnutrition. The cost of wheat flour, for example, has increased by 15 percent since January. Other foods have entirely disappeared from markets. Fish is no longer available due to an Israeli ban on Palestinian fishing, which has also eliminated the income of about 35,000 people.

As in Lebanon, Israel’s war crimes in the Occupied Territories have received the full backing of the US. Washington has failed to even issue the once customary calls for “restraint” on both sides. The Bush administration makes no secret of the fact that it considers the destruction of all Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation an essential part of its drive to forge a “new Middle East” under US domination. This is why Israel feels free to continue its onslaught on Gaza.



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