Israel inflicts mass suffering on Palestinian population

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Israel's bombardment of the Gaza strip, which after three days has killed at least 364 Palestinians and maimed scores, has sharply intensified a severe humanitarian crisis in the area.

In recent weeks Israel had taken new measures to choke Gaza off from its limited access to food, fuel, and other necessities. Amidst acute shortages caused by the blockade, the current Israeli onslaught imperils Gaza's entire population.

Evidence that Israeli's bombing campaign is no "surgical" operation, but a campaign of mass terror, continues to mount. Among the dead are at least 62 civilians, according to the United Nations.

Between Sunday night and Monday morning, two separate missile strikes killed eight children. In the Jebaliya refugee camp near Gaza City, an Israeli missile killed five children under the age of 17. In Rafah, in the South, a toddler and his two teenage brothers were killed in an attack ostensibly aimed at a Hamas commander. Over half of Gaza's population of 1.5 million are children under the age of 16.

On Monday, UNRWA, a United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, reported that an Israeli bomb killed eight students and injured twenty more at the Gaza Vocational Training Centre in Gaza City.

The rest of the dead were reportedly members of Hamas security forces or in training. They were utterly defenseless against the Israeli bombs and missiles. Many were killed in Israel's initial surprise attack inside their offices, homes, schools, and prisons.

Scores of buildings have been destroyed. Police stations and all other structures loosely connected with Hamas, which governs Gaza, have been pounded by heavy artillery and missiles, from the air, land, and sea. One Israeli strike targeted the women's wing and the faculty of the sciences building at the local Islamic University. It has also been reported that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) has destroyed Gaza's only port, which was engaged primarily in the fishing industry.

According to IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Networks) of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, (IDF) bombs have destroyed Gaza's already limited infrastructure, "leaving residents without electricity and water." As a result of the invasion local aid officials have warned that "a dire humanitarian situation looms."

Eyewitness accounts report that the sounds of jets and drones can be heard everywhere, supplied to the IDF by the US, punctuated by explosions, sirens, and the screams of people. "From my desk in my university classroom we could see the smoke from Israel's bombing and hear the most terrifying sound of non-stop explosions," writes Eman Mohammed. "Girls around me screamed in horror ... Some of my classmates ran out of the university, fearing their lives, but were killed by Israeli missiles as they fled."

"One of the injured at the hospital was a little boy heading home from school," he continued. "Terrified and unable to see due to his injury, the boy was shaking and holding on to anything alive. However, I think holding his hand helped me more than it helped him; I didn't have the words to comfort him. When doctors were able to attend to the boy, I promised him he would be OK. The next thing I knew, his little weak body, deprived of life, was

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lying on the hospital's cold floor. Was his crime being born Palestinian?"

"More than three buildings have been brought to the ground in my area," Hamoudi, of Tal el Hawa, said on the Al Jazeera web site. "Two of my neighbours were killed on their way back from school—sixteen-year-old Yasmeen and her sister, 15-year-old Haneen. They were innocent girls."

Hatem Shurrab, an aid worker in Gaza, said "the situation is getting worse day by day. They're targeting everything. We don't know when or where they will strike next. They're hitting hospitals, medical centres, universities, homes, security centres, police."

As Israel masses tanks on the border with Gaza, fears of a ground invasion have grown. "In a city that is so densely-populated, a ground offensive would mean urban warfare, street-to-street fighting ... leaving many Palestinians in the crossfire," a reporter for Al Jazeera said. "Unlike other conflict zones where there is the possibility to flee the war zone, Gaza itself has become the war zone. There is nowhere for the population to go, they are in the middle of all these attacks."

Israel has prepared the humanitarian crisis now unfolding over months, during which time it limited the movement of basic necessities into the Gaza Strip. Then, beginning on November 4, Israel closed off the few border crossings into Gaza, in evident preparation for the current bombardment.

A Gaza Health Ministry spokesman, Hamam Nasman, told IRIN that due to the Israeli blockade, local hospitals were ill-prepared for the injuries resulting from the current onslaught. "Since August we have not received basic medications," he said, "The ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross], which usually delivers 60 types of medication, has been unable to deliver a shipment for one month," he said. "One hundred and five drugs and 230 basic supplies, like alcohol, cotton, needles, and IVs are out of stock."

Mawia Hassanini, the head of emergency care at the health ministry, told IRIN that about half of Gaza's tiny fleet of ambulances is broken down for lack of parts due to the Israeli blockade—leaving about 100 ambulances to provide service for 1.7 million people suffering under the Israeli blitz. "Victims were being brought to hospitals in private cars, donkey carts, and some were being carried by others on foot," IRIN reports.

Through its blockade Israel openly flaunted the so-called "truce" between it and Hamas, which was based on the quid pro quo that Israel would ease the movement of goods into the territory, in exchange for a cessation of rocket fire by Palestinian militants. The purpose of the renewed blockade is now clear: it aimed to create a pretext for a full-scale military attack by goading the Palestinians into a response.

So severe was the blockade that even humanitarian organizations were forced to curtail their activities. UNRWA stopped food distributions in Gaza on December 18. Christopher Guinness, a spokesman for UNRWA, said that it had become "virtually impossible" to carry on humanitarian operations. Prior to the complete Israeli blockade, UNRWA supplied food to more than 750,000 people, while the World Food Programme provided for 200,000 more. In other words, almost two months before it began its massive bombing campaign, Israel cut off food supplies upon which a majority of the local population depended.

In the weeks leading up to the invasion, power and fuel shortages had caused widespread suffering. As a result, a large share of the population went without electricity for extended periods. Even energy to hospitals and to water and sewage treatment was limited, compounding the precarious health situation facing the population. (In its 2006 attack on Gaza, Israel targeted the area's sole power station. Now Gaza is dependent upon electricity imported from Israel for about 2/3 of its overall use.)

One of the few limited supply lines to Gaza—tunnels constructed under the border with Egypt—have been destroyed by Israeli strikes in the new attacks.

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