

As death toll mounts

Israel threatens ground invasion of Gaza

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Israel seems set for a ground invasion of Gaza following sustained bombardment that has left more than 300 dead and over 1,000 more injured.

According to unnamed Israeli defence officials, cabinet ministers have approved a broad-based land invasion of Gaza. Hundreds of Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) personnel, including those manning tanks and armoured vehicles, are already stationed on the border. The IDF has called up 6,500 reservists.

Israeli Air Force (IAF) warplanes continued their assault yesterday, striking at least 30 targets in the Gaza Strip in the early morning, including a mosque and the Al Aqsa TV station. The IAF then bombed more than 40 supply tunnels in the southern Gaza Strip, including a major tunnel bringing fuel from Egypt.

Hundreds of Palestinians stormed a fence on the Gaza-Egypt border, but they were fired on and repelled by Egyptian security forces. Hamas has accused Egypt of collusion with Israel for refusing to open the Rafah crossing on its border with Gaza.

Haaretz military correspondent Amos Harel has called the operation Israel's version of "shock and awe," saying it was "the closest thing there is to a war between Israel and Hamas." Israel has targeted more than 200 sites since the operation began on Saturday.

Saturday's "Operation Cast Lead" was a brutal instance of collective punishment of Gaza's 1.5 million inhabitants. It involved 64 aircraft dropping more than 100 tons of explosives, the largest Israeli operation against Gaza since 1967. The death toll includes women and children.

The fatalities also include three senior Hamas officers. Known Hamas facilities were targeted, but residential areas were hit even near schools and hospitals. Hamas said all of Gaza's security compounds were destroyed. An estimated two thirds of the casualties were police officers or members of the various Hamas security forces, according to a senior Gazan medical official.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Gaza's hospitals have been "overwhelmed by casualties." Reporting how the Israelis targeted graduation day at Gaza City's main police station, the newspaper described "the bloodied bodies of dozens of dead and wounded young Palestinian men in black uniforms, as survivors rushed to assist the injured...."

"At Gaza City's main Shifa Hospital, bodies were arranged in the parking lot. One woman wandered, screaming, 'My son, my son!' Eventually she found the boy's body and fetched a cloth to cover his near-naked corpse."

"After Saturday's Israeli air attacks, 215 victims arrived at Shifa hospital within 15 minutes," the report continued. "Ahmad Sinwar, 4, was playing in the courtyard of his southern Gaza City home when the

adjacent civil defence headquarters was bombed. He was killed by a flying chunk of concrete that also injured two of his siblings. 'I never expected that the civil defence headquarters would be considered a military target,' said Ahmad's weeping father, Reyad Sinwar."

Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni has threatened further assassinations of Hamas leaders, warning that "nobody is immune." "Until now we have shown restraint," she said. "But today there is no other option than a military operation."

Defence Minister Ehud Barak threatened a ground invasion Saturday and ruled out any possibility of a cease-fire. "For us to be asked to have a cease-fire with Hamas is like asking you to have a cease-fire with Al Qaeda," he told Fox News. "If boots on the ground will be needed, they will be there."

Emphasising the scale of the assault being considered, he threatened, "Our intention is to totally change the rules of the game."

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert echoed this message, stating that the goal was to bring about a "fundamental improvement" in the security situation.

The Western powers made their usual two-faced appeal for Israel to show restraint and proportionality, while blaming Hamas for the violence. They have accepted Israel's justification for its murderous assault as a response to the resumption of ineffectual rocket and mortar fire against Israeli towns in the Western Negev following the end of a truce between Hamas and Israel that was negotiated last June by Egypt. The Palestinian rockets led to the loss of one life on Sunday—*after* Israel's bombardment of Gaza.

The United States was most bellicose, with a White House spokesman stating of Hamas, "These people are nothing but thugs, so Israel is going to defend its people against terrorists like Hamas that indiscriminately kill their own people."

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the US held Hamas responsible for breaking the ceasefire and for the renewal of violence in Gaza. The White House pointedly did not call for an end to the Israeli Air Force strikes.

The United Nations Security Council on Sunday called for an immediate cessation of violence in the Gaza Strip. But it rejected demands from Libya for an open council meeting and the adoption of a presidential statement, accepting a Russian proposal for a press statement instead.

The European Union appealed for "everybody to exert maximum restraint." A spokesman for French President Nicolas Sarkozy called for "an immediate halt to the firing of rockets on Israel and to the Israeli bombings in Gaza," while the British Foreign Office said that it understood "the Israeli government's obligation to protect its population" and said there had to be an end to "all rocket attacks on

Israel." Russia also understood "the Israeli government's obligation to protect its population" and called on "militants in the Gaza Strip to immediately cease all rocket attacks on Israel."

Egypt condemned Israel's attacks and blamed it for those killed and wounded, but pledged continued collaboration with Washington's supposed efforts to "create a favourable atmosphere for renewing the truce and attaining inter-Palestinian reconciliation" between Hamas and President Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah. Earlier, President Hosni Mubarak invited Livni to Cairo to discuss the possibility of renewing the truce, but she responded by stating, "Enough is enough. When there's shooting, there's a response."

Protesters across the Middle East on Sunday held a second day of demonstrations against Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip. In the occupied West Bank, one protester was killed and at least two others critically injured by Israeli fire at a protest near Ramallah.

In Yemen, tens of thousands of people gathered at a stadium in the capital, chanting anti-Israeli slogans and denouncing Arab leaders for failing to act. "How long will the silence last? Arabs wake up!" read one banner.

Several members of Jordan's parliament burned the Israeli flag under the parliament dome while in session on Sunday, after calling for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador to Amman. In Lebanon, hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinian refugees staged a sit-in near the United Nations office in central Beirut. Demonstrations also took place across Iraq. Dozens of Palestinian refugees gathered in Baghdad's eastern Baladiyah neighbourhood chanting anti-Israeli slogans and waving messages of support for Gaza.

Protests have also taken place in Damascus, Egypt and Sudan. In the West, demonstrations denouncing the Israeli assault have occurred in London, Chicago, Atlanta and other cities.

Israel has waged a systematic campaign against Gaza since Hamas won the elections to the Palestinian Authority in January 2006, defeating Fatah, which is backed by both Israel and the US. Israel has fomented civil war between Fatah, whose power base is in Ramallah on the West Bank, and Hamas.

Since June 2007, when Hamas thwarted a planned Fatah coup against it by seizing control of Gaza, Israel has mounted a blockade to deny Gazans all but the most essential provisions. Basic services such as water, sewage and electricity have been cut for up to 16 hours a day. Raw sewage runs through the streets. At least 50 percent of the adult population is unemployed, and 80 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

Earlier this month, Gaza's banks had all but run out of cash as a result of Israel's restrictions, leading to the closure of all banks and cash machines. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency was forced to suspend the distribution of cash to 94,000 Palestinians.

In November, after rockets hit Sderot, a town in southern Israel, Israel imposed a total closure of the border with Gaza. With the formal ending of the Israeli-Hamas ceasefire on December 19, military clashes resumed.

The stepping up of the offensive against Gaza has more to do with the Israeli general election, scheduled for February 10, than with the resumption of rocket fire by Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants.

Barak and Livni are both running for prime minister in a contest that is presently dominated by Benjamin Netanyahu of the opposition Likud. Netanyahu has focused his campaign on calls for an even more aggressive "active policy of attack" against Hamas, accusing the current coalition government of Kadima and Labour of being too "passive." He declared, "In the long term, the toppling of the Hamas

regime is inevitable. In the short term...there are a wide range of possibilities, from doing nothing to doing everything, meaning to conquer Gaza."

Livni responded by telling a meeting of Kadima that she would topple Hamas if she became prime minister. "The state of Israel, and a government under me, will make it a strategic objective to topple the Hamas regime in Gaza," she said. "The means for doing this should be military, economic and diplomatic."

Livni has also indicated that any deal reached with Fatah's Abbas to set up a Palestinian state in parts of the West Bank would be a cue for the ethnic cleansing of Israeli Arabs. A Palestinian state would provide "a national solution" for Israel's Arabs, she told Israeli radio. Her programme for maintaining a Jewish and "democratic" state of Israel was "to have two distinct national entities," she said. "Among other things," she added, "I will also be able to approach the Palestinian residents of Israel...and tell them: 'Your national aspirations lie elsewhere.'"

The expulsion of Israeli Arabs has long been promoted by the Israeli far right. Arabs who are Israeli citizens now number more than 1 million and constitute about 15 percent of the population. Within the next 20 years, it is expected that the Arab population, with its higher birth rate, could outnumber the Jewish population and thus challenge the explicitly Jewish character of the state itself.

Barak, who heads the Labour Party, is threatened with a wipe-out in the election and is desperate to establish his anti-Palestinian credentials. The Labour Party's main policy plank, a deal with the Palestinians based on a truncated Palestinian state dominated by Israel, is indistinguishable from that of Kadima, which former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon formed out of Likud as his own political vehicle. Many of Labour's leading lights have joined Kadima, including Shimon Peres, Dalia Itzik and Ami Ayalon.

With Kadima likely to lose the elections, Labour is preparing to seek a coalition with Likud and is lurching rightwards in anticipation.

An additional factor in Israel's calculations is the replacement of the Bush administration by a Democratic White House under Barack Obama on January 20. Many leading Israelis view Obama with suspicion.

For his part, Obama has done all he can to reassure both the Israelis and the US ruling elite. He told the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in June that he would "never compromise when it comes to Israel's security" and declared his support for the Bush administration's policy of refusing to negotiate with Hamas.



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