

Israel continues to pound Gaza as troops mass on border

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Israeli jets continued to pound the Gaza Strip for a fourth day amidst threats of worse to come. As the death toll climbed, Israel's war crimes received barely any censure from Western and Arab leaders, and continued to have the more-or-less open approval of Washington.

The number killed in Operation Cast Lead has now surpassed 375. The United Nations says at least 62 of these are civilians, but this only covers women and children killed. No males above a certain age are included in the civilian death toll. Some 1,700 people have been wounded.

Israeli warplanes have dropped tons of bombs on government buildings and infrastructure over the last days in what Defence Minister Ehud Barak described as an "all-out war against Hamas." Brigadier-General Dan Harel, Israeli deputy chief of staff, said the objective was to erase Hamas.

"After this operation there will not be a single Hamas building left standing in Gaza, and we plan to change the rules of the game," he said.

"We are hitting not only terrorists and launchers, but also the whole Hamas government and all its wings. We are hitting government buildings, production factories, security wings and more."

An unnamed leading Israeli military official said, "There are many aspects of Hamas, and we are trying to hit the whole spectrum, because everything is connected and everything supports terrorism against Israel."

So far, Israel has admitted targeting the police academy, government ministries and a naval base on the beach and the marina. But, as Hamas is also responsible for administering any semblance of welfare provision that exists, nothing is off-target, including the University of Gaza, whose five-story science building was flattened on Monday morning, and a sports centre, as well as the homes of Hamas leaders and supporters.

Given that Hamas won the majority of seats in the June 2006 elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council, the population of Gaza in its entirety is considered a legitimate target by the Zionist regime.

Five sisters were amongst those killed on Monday as the mosque next door to their home was struck by Israeli bombs. Jawaher, 4, Dina, 8, Samar, 12, Ikram, 15, and Tahrir, 17, were killed in their beds when one of the walls of their small home collapsed during the strike.

An Italian member of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) offered this description: "Yesterday, I and three other members of the ISM passed the whole night in the al Awda hospital near Jabalia.... Around

11:30 p.m. a bomb fell about 800 metres from the hospital, with its shockwave sending fragments of glass wounding the wounded...an ambulance was wrecked in its place, they knocked down a mosque, fortunately empty at that hour. Unfortunately...the Israeli bomb also destroyed a building adjacent to the mosque. We saw them pull out of the ruins the little bodies of six sisters. Five are dead, one is in grave condition."

The Israeli military claimed that the mosque was a legitimate target because it was a "known gathering place" of Hamas supporters.

Another two sisters aged 11 and 4 were killed on Tuesday when an Israeli rocket struck their donkey cart in the northern town of Beit Hanun.

Richard Falk, the special rapporteur for human rights in the Palestinian territories, accused Israel of "shocking atrocities by using modern weaponry against a defenceless population—attacking a population that has been enduring a severe blockade for many months."

Food is in extremely short supply. UN food distribution was halted on December 18 due to border closures, despite some 80 percent of Gaza's 1.5 million people being dependent on food aid.

Cemeteries are said to be filling up so fast there is barely enough space for burials, while bodies pile up in hospitals, overwhelmed by the humanitarian catastrophe. Gaza's largest hospital Al Shifa had been placing corpses in ice-cream freezers when the morgue was full, but is unable to do so any longer due to electricity shortages caused by the bombardment.

Medicine and medical supplies have also run out due to the year-long siege imposed by Israel, and hospitals are treating only life-threatening cases.

On Tuesday, the Free Gaza Movement reported that its vessel, the Dignity, which it was using to transport medical supplies by sea to the besieged territory, was rammed and turned back by Israeli naval ships. The Dignity sustained heavy damage, the group reported, although no one was hurt. "When attacked, the Dignity was clearly in international waters, 90 miles off the coast of Gaza," a press release stated, describing Israel's actions as "wilful and criminal."

Israel's Foreign Ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor said, "The fact that the ship was carrying journalists, including a CNN crew that has already broadcasted live three times, proves that this was a provocation on the part of the media."

The administration's nervousness at the presence of journalists is

conditioned by the scale of the devastation it has already wreaked, and the even worse atrocities it is preparing.

On Sunday, Israeli jets destroyed the offices of Al Aqsa Television. The assault, in which one person was injured, was condemned by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) as demonstrating "that when it comes to its own military and political agenda Israel is willing to abandon its responsibilities under international law."

Gaza has been declared off limits to journalists since the commencement of the bombing campaign. On Monday, this was extended into its border region with Israel. The ban has been denounced as unprecedented by the Foreign Press Association, which has sought to mount a legal challenge to the order.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert described the bombardment as just "the first of several stages" of military action, as Israeli troops continue to mass along the border with Gaza. Deputy Defence Minister Matan Vilnai warned that Israel was "ready for a prolonged conflict and for weeks of combat."

Spiegel Online cited an anonymous army spokeswoman, stating, "The ground forces are ready.... The option [of a ground operation] exists. It is possible that we will apply it but for the moment we are only hitting from the air and the sea."

Israel's decision to declare the area around Gaza a "closed military zone" was seen as an indication that a ground offensive could be imminent.

Israel claims that its actions are necessary in order to protect Israeli civilians in border areas from rocket and mortar fire by Hamas. But as David Morrison, from the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, noted in the *Irish Times*, between the Israeli-Hamas ceasefire brokered in June and December 27, "no Israeli, civilian or military, was killed as a result of rocket or mortar fire from Gaza."

It was not until early November, when *Israel broke the cease-fire* that the largely ineffective mortar-fire resumed. On November 4, "while the world was watching the election of Barack Obama," Israel killed six Palestinians in Gaza, Morrison wrote. "As a result of this unprovoked assault by Israel, the ceasefire broke down—and rocket or mortar fire from Gaza started again."

These facts are well known to Western leaders and the Arab states who, while intoning their regret at the loss of innocent lives in Gaza, essentially portray Israel as the aggrieved party.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon complained of Israel's "excessive use of force," even as he parroted the claim that its actions were in self-defence.

The European Commission called for a truce, but even this mealy-mouthed appeal was brushed aside by Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, who stated that there "is no reason" why Israel "would accept a ceasefire at this stage."

Israel has been able to rely on the unconditional support of its Washington paymasters for its military onslaught. White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe said, "The United States understands that Israel needs to take actions to defend itself."

Ehud Barak cited the remarks of Barack Obama during his June 2008

visit to the city of Sderot. Speaking of the mortar-fire aimed at the city from Gaza, Obama had stated, "Had anyone fired rockets against my home while my two daughters were sleeping I would have done everything to stop him and I assume the Israelis would do the same thing."

"That is what Obama said and that is what we are doing," Barak concluded.

More broadly, the *Jerusalem Post* December 30 reported on the success of Israel's international "media offensive." It cited former UN ambassador Dan Gillerman, who was drafted into the propaganda offensive by Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni shortly before the current assault, stating approvingly that "at this moment Israel has no small measure of understanding and support, and even approval, from many countries."

"We haven't seen dramatic condemnations [from world leaders], only the expected and generic calls for calm and cease-fire," Gillerman stated. "Even in the UN I didn't see anyone happy to condemn us."

Tony Blair, appointed Middle East envoy with much fanfare in June 2007, is not expected to visit the area until next week for talks between Israeli and Palestinian officials—giving Israel even greater latitude for its offensive.

And it was reported that a planned "emergency Arab summit" on events in Gaza, scheduled for Qatar on Friday, might not be held. According to *Middle East Online*, the Arab League was to have agreed to the summit as a venue for discussions on the Israeli offensive during today's meeting of foreign ministers in Cairo. But this was still uncertain, because some countries such as Egypt are not in favour, it reported.

"Staging an Arab summit could be dangerous and subject to criticism, especially if it does not result in practical measures," Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit said.

A meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council yesterday issued a statement that made no reference to a proposal by Qatar for an emergency Arab summit.

Egypt has continued to maintain tight control over its borders with Gaza, preventing the beleaguered Palestinian population from finding refuge. Its complicity with Israel has meant that, alongside other Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, it has become a target for protests.

Demonstrations were held yesterday outside Egyptian embassies and concerns in Yemen and Iran.

Demonstrations were also ongoing outside the Israeli embassy in London, where riot police have clashed with protesters over the last days and a number have been arrested, as well as in Berlin, Athens and Stockholm.

Clashes are also taking place within Israel. *YNet News* reported that hundreds of "Jewish and Arab students belonging to a leftist movement" at Haifa University staged a demonstration Monday, calling for an end to Operation Cast Lead.

"During the protests, an argument broke out between left-wing lecturers and IDF officers studying at the university, who were dressed in uniform and carrying their weapons," it reported, and there were angry confrontations with right-wing students.

Protests were also held at campuses on the Universities of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Israeli security forces were reported as having detained some 100 Arab residents in east Jerusalem following disturbances involving approximately 1,000 people in the area. In addition, 107 Arab teenagers were arrested in the northern district of Jerusalem, also for their alleged involvement in protests against Israel's actions.



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